

HOUSE MUSIC

HOUSE MUSIC:  
ANXIETY, ORDER, FORM, AND THE DOMESTIC  
IN THE WORKS OF ELIZABETH BISHOP,  
GWENDOLYN BROOKS, AND ANNE SEXTON

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## LAY ABSTRACT

The mid-20th century American female poets Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Gwendolyn Brooks addressed anxieties around seeking, keeping, and surviving home spaces while incorporating elements of poetic form (including metre, stanzas, and rhyme). I show how form and domestic subject matter can interact to signify active responses to trauma resulting from childhood abandonment, physical/sexual abuse, homophobia, madness, and systemic racism. I argue that form at its most effective should be neither a “container”—a “house” of words—nor a sign that the poet is conservative and/or old-fashioned. Rather, I invite my readers to consider the formal poem as a potential “home” in which the structure becomes an extension of the inner personal forces that animate it, helping it to offer shelter and a means of resistance to the writer and reader/listener, as well as forge connections in the public sphere, both thematically and in performance.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation discusses the way in which mid-20th century American female poets Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Gwendolyn Brooks addressed anxieties around seeking, keeping, and surviving home spaces while incorporating elements of formal poetic structure (including metre, stanzaic configurations, and rhyme). Susan Fraiman, in *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins*, suggests that domestic space and practice can become sites of improvisation, rebellion, and refuge. Building on this theory, I show how form and domestic subject matter can interact to signify active responses to trauma resulting from childhood abandonment, physical/sexual abuse, homophobia, madness, and systemic racism. I argue that poetic form at its most effective does not function as an homage to either patriarchal canonical models of restraint or craftpersonship but animates the work from the inside out and effectively creates poem-spaces that are metaphorical “homes” rather than “houses”.

My work adds to the fields of American poetry and prosodic scholarship by incorporating close reading techniques that neither follow New Criticism mandates that privilege authorial choice/structural integrity over biographical and sociopolitical resonances nor assign specific meaning to how form is used. Instead, this project encourages readers, students of poetry, and practitioners to rethink how formal structures in poetic work can emerge from and engage with the highly personal and how the implementation of formal technique can potentially offer shelter and a means of articulating trauma and resistance whilst extending into the public sphere (either thematically or through the vehicle of performance) to offer intimacy and forge community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The mid-20th-century American writer, producer, and actress Gertrude Berg (in character as Bronx matriarch Mrs. Goldberg) said, “Hello is such a little word for such a big feeling.” Riffing off this, I would like to say that one page is such a little space for such a debt of gratitude owed to so many.

This dissertation is the culmination of six years of intense study and writing, plus another two “preface” years of waffling about whether or not I should take the leap into doctoral studies (spoiler alert: I did). Throughout it all, my supervisor Jeffery Donaldson has demonstrated leviathan support and patience. My gratitude to him is boundless. Thanks are also due to the rest of my committee: Melinda Gough, whose honesty and eye and ear for detail were invaluable, and Anne Savage, whose reassurances and witty take on the proceedings were both tonic and illuminating. My external, Stephanie Burt of Harvard University, went above and beyond the call of duty and provided me with enough guidance and inspiration to take me through a lifetime of future projects. To Cathy Gris , Roger Hyman, Grace Kehler, Susie O'Brien, Mary Silcox, and Eugenia Zuroski, I owe a massive debt, as I do to Sophie Goellnicht, Antoinette Somo, Angela Zaya, and the unstoppable and unflappable Ilona Forgo Smith. Thanks are also due to my University of Southern Maine Stonecoast M.F.A. mentors, Jeanne Marie Beaumont, Annie Finch, and Charles Martin, as well as Christine Ferguson, Richard Greene, Luke Hathaway, and Shane Neilson, for buffering my entry into a world of large books, monstrous lists, and sleepless nights. I salute my colleagues in the field; their ranks include Crystal Beamer, Stacy Creech, Kristine Germann, Barbara Ferguson, Omar Khafagy, Paige Maylott, Emily Scherzinger, Kalin Smith, Olivia Weigeldt, and Taif Zuhair. Equally deserving of acknowledgment are my fellow poets Jason Guriel, Amanda Johnston, Allison Joseph, Taylor Mali, Mary Meriam, and Molly Peacock, as well as my publisher at Biblioasis Daniel Wells, whose faith in me and my work has remained a sustaining force. In my hometown of Vancouver, I have always had the support and love of my family (the Oliver-Thenys), Sarah Macaulay, Diah Pera and Jelena Plavsic, as well as that (further afield) of Jennifer Brissett, Justine Brown, Shanna McNair, and Scott Wolven. Finally, the biggest thanks go out to my husband Dragan and my son Gavriilo (Gavra), who have put up with a loss of form and a surfeit of domestic catastrophe like champions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS I:  
SCANSION

In this paper, I have used the traditional scansion system advocated by Dr. Annie Finch in her Rhythms of Poetry workshop at the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing program. Symbols include:

**u (breve)** for **unstressed syllables**

**/ (ictus)** for **stressed syllables**

**\** for **half-stressed syllables**

**|** for **foot breaks**

**||** for **caesurae**

- In certain excerpts from free-verse poems, I have marked only the stressed and unstressed syllables as well as caesurae. In others, where the metre falls into a base pattern, I have added foot boundaries.
- Foot breaks are usually marked on the same line as the scansion marks. However, I personally find it useful to position them within the line itself, so that is what I have done.
- Some scholars/prosodists choose to mark caesurae after any kind of breath pause, including those that occur after noun and verb phrases. For clarity, I have always chosen to insert these after medial punctuation marks, such as colons, semi-colons, em dashes, commas, and periods.
- When I say that a foot is a half-iamb or a half-trochee (for example), I am referring to one in which the stronger stress is a half-stressed syllable rather than a fully stressed syllable.
- In the text itself (i.e. not in indented quotations), I have indicated full stress by using bold black text and half-stress by using bold grey text. Extra syllable endings are indicated within the text by underlined script.



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS II:  
POETIC FEET<sup>1</sup>

FOOT	NAME OF FOOT
u /	iamb
/ u	trochee
u u	pyrrhic
//	spondee
u u /	anapest
/ u u	dactyl
u / u	amphibrach
/ u /	cretic (a.k.a amphimacer)
u //	bacchius
// u	antibacchius
u u u	tribrach
///	molossus
/ u u u	first paeon
u / u u	second paeon
u u / u	third paeon
u u u /	fourth paeon

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<sup>1</sup>From *A Poet's Craft* by Annie Finch (University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 311.

FOOT	NAME OF FOOT
u u //	double iamb
// u u	major ionic
u // u	antispast
u / u /	iamb
u ///	first epitrite
/ u //	second epitrite
/ u u /	choriamb
u u u u	tetrarch
////	dispondee

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS III:

PHONEMIC ALPHABET<sup>2</sup>

VOWELS: MONOPHTHONGS	VOWELS: DIPHTHONGS	CONSONANTS: VOICED	CONSONANTS: UNVOICED
i: <u>bee</u> p	ɪə <u>clea</u> r	p <u>pa</u> t	b <u>bo</u> y
I <u>pi</u> t	eɪ <u>straigh</u> t	t <u>tie</u>	d <u>da</u> te
ʊ <u>woo</u> d	ʊə <u>tour</u> ist	tʃ <u>chil</u> drən	dʒ <u>Jul</u> y
u: <u>flu</u> te	ɔɪ <u>to</u> y	k <u>ca</u> t	g <u>go</u> at
e <u>hea</u> d	eə <u>ch</u> air	f <u>fr</u> iend	v <u>va</u> n
ə <u>colou</u> r	aɪ <u>bu</u> y	θ <u>thou</u> ght	ð <u>tha</u> t
ɜ: <u>wo</u> rd	əʊ <u>glow</u>	s <u>sa</u> nd	z <u>zi</u> p
ɔ: <u>floo</u> r	aʊ <u>no</u> w	ʃ <u>sho</u> e	ʒ <u>televisi</u> on
æ <u>ha</u> t		h <u>he</u> ight	m <u>mo</u> use
ʌ <u>cu</u> p			n <u>ni</u> ght
ɑ: <u>ca</u> r			ŋ <u>br</u> ing
ɒ <u>go</u> ne			l <u>li</u> ght
			r <u>ru</u> n
			w <u>wi</u> nd
			j <u>ye</u> llow

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<sup>2</sup> “Phonemic Chart”.

## DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

I, Alexandra Basekic, declare this dissertation to be my own, original work, not previously published nor submitted for a higher degree at another institution.

Even though I am following the “traditional” (ictus and breve-based) system for scansion of accentual-syllabic poetry practiced and advocated by many before me, including my past mentor in the Stonecoast MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine, Dr. Annie Finch, the analyses that I have presented are entirely my own. To the best of my knowledge, the contents of this paper do not infringe on anyone’s copyright.

But when I speak of containment, I am speaking about not being overwhelmed; I am not speaking about tying something up in a package to be shelved. I am indicating a poetic method of coping with the vastness of emotion that makes the poem worth writing in the first place. If you think of form as the outside of an Inside, that is only half the truth. Verse form is also inside the Inside. It acts as a skeleton as well as a skin. It is a body. Verse form literally embodies the emotion of the poem, in the sense that embodiment both *is* and *contains* the life it is the body of. The need to embody the dangerous is both a need to surround it *and* then to live it. Therefore the initial choice is to contain and the subsequent writing allows the danger to live as made possible by the containment.

—Molly Peacock, “One Green, One Blue: One Point About Formal Verse Writing and Another About Women Writing Formal Verse”

On all occasions Robinet thinks of form, from the inside out. For him, life originates forms, and that it is perfectly natural that life, which is the cause of forms, should create living forms. Once again, for such daydreams as these, form is the habitat of life.

—Gaston Bachelard, “Shells,” *The Poetics of Space*

## INTRODUCTION

### At Home in American Women's Poetry: The Housekeeping of Form

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
Haunting the dark air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind. (1-7)

It was on the back of an older school friend's binder in 1987 that I first discovered Anne Sexton's poem "Her Kind," the first seven lines of which appear above. As a gothic sixteen-year-old given to high drama, I was immediately arrested by the imagery and by the sheer performance value of the poem. But there was more. Reading deeper into the poet's backstory threw a light switch on in my brain: Sexton, a mid-20th century housewife with a muddy family history of her own, had suffered a crippling breakdown, leading her into poetry as a means of therapy (Trinidad 27). My own mother had been, like Sexton, a casualty of what Betty Friedan termed "The Feminine Mystique." Being expected to perform impeccably on the home front, whilst keeping up an image of svelte, groomed perfection, had eroded my mother's psyche to the point where she, like many other wives in the period following the Second World War, submitted to disillusion, self-doubt, rage, and alcohol abuse. Sexton's tale of flying witches, hidden caves, and vilified women waving "nude arms" from carts as they were hauled away to certain death rang horribly and brilliantly true. And it rang true over and over again, for I was thereafter able to remember the whole poem. For all its irrational strangeness, "Her Kind," so artfully

mannered, chimed with its own logic. Its music—along with its radical confessional stance—made it both as bracing as an engaged listener (for a poem *can* listen) and as soothing as a lullaby.

I am going to follow this story up by confessing that I have always been attracted to metre. I hear it in airplane safety announcements, newscasts, university lectures, and doctor's visits. I realize full well that this might be perceived as a spurious claim and that it puts me on the same level as the boy in the M. Night Shyamalan film who gravely tells the child psychologist, "I see dead people."<sup>3</sup> The reason I feel metre to be important, in my own life, in my perception of speech and literature and song, as well as in my own poetic practice of the past thirty years, is because I feel it establishes both comfort and order while simultaneously allowing the poet to express the tensions of the unsayable. The process of writing in form has the potential to be an assertion of control and agency, even (and perhaps, especially) at moments where neither seems accessible. In spite of the fact that the stereotype of metrical poetry presents it as rigid and plodding, the skilful practitioner is able to manipulate perceptions through elements including variations and word music; it is for this reason that, within established form, lurks the potential for signalling rebellion or defeat or irony. Derek Attridge laments popular scholarship's tendency towards "concentration on content and context rather than shape, sound and movement"(9). Whereas I identify with Attridge's claim to some extent. I cannot subscribe to the logic that the poet has to choose one set of elements over another; to

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<sup>3</sup> *The Sixth Sense*. Dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999.

focus entirely on structure means that the poet is building a house rather than creating a home. In order to turn a poem into a home, there must be the factoring in of history, biographical context, and the subjective pulse, which, working *with* the form, renders it a vital and elastic creation. Indeed, with this in mind, the elements of “shape, sound and movement” represent a triple threat; in the right hands, with the right variations, the sonically well-crafted poem can become the ultimate weapon. Being at home in metre and form can mean, for the poet, being at home in a means of resistance.

Stylistic and ideological differences aside, Sexton and her mid-20th century American contemporaries Elizabeth Bishop and Gwendolyn Brooks all shared the experience of being tied to the quests of seeking homes, keeping homes, and defying the constraints of home. In spite of the general shift towards free verse in the first quarter of the 20th century (a shift that admittedly engaged them as well), these poets read and admired the formally-shaped work of their literary forebears while employing formal constraint in many of their own works. It is my aim to examine in this dissertation how the work of Bishop, Brooks and Sexton uses metre and form to express and transgress anxiety as it relates to the American Home and process of homemaking. It will take into consideration biographical and socio-historical contexts in order to analyze how this work demonstrates a sophisticated interplay between these contexts and form itself, suggesting that form is not a “thing” that is built but a force that permeates and animates the work as a whole with its own vitality. I will also be touching on the question of female oral delivery and how it dovetails with Bishop’s, Brooks’s, and Sexton’s approaches as both



readers and writers. How these poets read their formally-constructed work out loud may initially seem like “extra” information, yet it crucially suggests how they intended (consciously or subconsciously) their work to be received by the public ear, even as it spoke of private domestic concerns. When we hear the hushed, almost apologetic tones of Bishop reading “Sleeping on the Ceiling” or “Filling Station,” the effect seems a million miles away from that stirred by the dramatic and distinctly self-conscious performances of Sexton (who courted 60’s rock culture and even performed intermittently with a band named Her Kind), and the knowing and composed, near-oracular delivery of Brooks. In hearing these works spoken aloud, we are brought to a place where the formally-wrought poem-space becomes a symbol of new potential. The public and private spheres co-mingle in performance; as seen filtered through Bishop, Brooks, and Sexton, this broadcasting, this transcendence of spheres, can respectively embody intimacy, the liberation of sexual rebellion and magic-making, or the recreation of new homes and sites of inclusion through political engagement. This, in turn, reminds the modern female-identified poet that the task of generating formal poetry is not one which is obligated to replicate the “craftswoman” approach of the mid-19th century, where work concerning the private domestic sphere finds itself confined to the four walls of the house and the flat limitations of the page. Our own poems need to loom larger and louder; they must become conversation pieces, spells, loudspeakers, manifestos.

Divining Intent in Form

The contemporary poet who chooses to write in form in 2022 has their work cut out for them. Despite a resurgence of interest in the potential of form and the use of the metrical line, there is an enduring attitude of skepticism directed towards the imperative to impose order on words and sounds in a world where freedom is supposedly held in higher esteem than ever. If one is lucky enough to move past that skepticism, there remains the seemingly arbitrary nature of the mechanics themselves. *Why* does one choose a certain metre? *Why* does one insert variations at certain moments? Are they deliberate or accidental? Furthermore, if we are reading the work of others, how are we to reliably draw connections between metrical choices and affect? There is, undeniably, what I will call a “tin foil hat” aspect to perceptions around unravelling the metrical poem and discerning the emotional pulse that accompanies the metrical. To say, “Believe me!” will not do. I cannot ask you, the reader of this dissertation, to comprehend the emotional weight of a metrical line on demand any more than I could ask you to join me in seeing dead people. This is where cogent prosodic scholarship makes itself useful. Scholars including Derek Attridge, Annie Finch, Paul Fussell, and Angela Leighton have provided illuminating clues as to how poets manipulate metre and other elements to signify meaning. My own analysis of prosodic structures has, up until now, relied on an intuitive approach heralded by Fussell but is probably most in line with that of my past co-editor

and mentor at the University of Southern Maine, Dr. Finch.<sup>4</sup> Based on what I have learned from those prosodists before me, my goal is to fashion an argument which will not only provide perspective on how Bishop, Brooks, and Sexton describe their anxieties about home through the formal shaping of their respective work but also use this as the basis for re-examining how metre and form can serve the poet of today who aims to make compassion, diversity, and inclusivity an integral part of their practice.

One of the incentives for beginning this project is the fact that relatively little scholarly research has been dedicated to *how* the use of poetic form by female poets dovetails with psychological states, particularly with regard to the act of home-seeking and home-making. The different discrete critical threads which exist are compelling; however, they have not as yet—to employ a suitably domestic metaphor—been woven completely together. Sexton scholar Diane Wood Middlebrook draws attention to how Sexton emerged as a formal writer, seeking “to achieve a mode of expression for this particular female consciousness, expression at once intimate and theatrical” (“Poet of Weird Abundance” 79). Katha Pollitt argues that Sexton’s greatest potential as a confessional voice lay in her maneuvering within metre (“That Awful Rowing” 69-70).

Vicki Feaver has argued eloquently that Bishop’s works (she cites “The Fish,” “The Moose,” and “Filling Station”) convert, in their quest for home and intimacy, traditionally

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting here that Finch often views the effects of metrical configurations through the lens of the supernatural and her own practice of earth-based religion. Whilst I respect this connection and find it highly interesting, my own analytical approach is more secular and psychologically-based.

“male” environments into womb-spaces, animated by repetitive sound (“Elizabeth Bishop: The Reclamation of Female Space” 87). Gloria T. Hull delves into the technical characteristics of Brooks’s work (phrasing, grammatical structures, sonic device) without either executing prosodic analysis or making specific mention of the domestic environment (“A Note on the Poetic Technique of Gwendolyn Brooks” 280-285). George E. Kent’s 1990 biography of Brooks makes liberal mention of both the poet’s affinity for form and experience with domestic order and yet neglects to contemplate the two side-by-side. These leads are incomplete unto themselves, although they jointly lead to the potential for a fresh and untested argument.

For female-identified poets, the rise of the alt-right, with its focus on backtracking in order to entrench traditional gender roles, provides a chilling context and, therefore, a searingly urgent imperative for practitioners to rethink their game. The irony of alt-right thinking in American politics and media is that it proposes a theatrically cultivated image of the domestic (as heralded, for example, by the evangelical Christian demographic and social media-generated phenomena, including the Tradwife movement)<sup>5</sup> while displaying an erosion of logic in sociopolitical discourse. How can we, as poets, rethink form (and its employment to touch on the domestic) so as not to play into simplistic prescriptive social models? In *Defensive Measures: The Poetry of Bishop, Niedecker, Glück, and Carson*,

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<sup>5</sup> The Tradwife movement, which I expound upon further in my conclusion, is an online-driven trend generated by and celebrating conservative women who choose to return to the home and adhere to models of patriarchal control (Kelly).

Lee Upton argues that “poetry would seem to have mechanisms for shielding, even of retreating, as much as it contains or exemplifies measures of assertion” (15-16). The alternative “home” presented by the poem-space offers the poet (and, by extension, the engaged reader) a shelter from encroaching chaos; however, alchemy and subversion can also simmer within formal structures. Home is where we might retreat from the storm but also holds the potential to become its own site of storm-making.

#### Home: A Powerless Site?

As we take into account commentaries like Betty Friedan’s seminal study *The Feminine Mystique*, as well as (for example) the literature of Charlotte Anna Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, and Richard Yates, and the poetry of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich, our first impulse as readers and critics might be to automatically daub the domestic-formal connection with the brush of conservatism and subsequent oppression.<sup>6</sup> As the use of the formal line is supposedly constraining (here we hearken back to Ezra Pound’s exhortation to make “the first heave” and “break the pentameter”),<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Anna Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was an influential early feminist, author of numerous works including the 1892 short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Kate Chopin (1850-1904) is perhaps best known as the author of *The Awakening*. Richard Yates (1926-1992) was an American fiction author whose 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* epitomized what W.H. Auden termed “The Age of Anxiety”. Anne Sexton (1928-1974) is one of the three poets covered in my dissertation. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was the author of *The Bell Jar*, *The Colossus*, and *Ariel*. Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was a poet and ground-breaking feminist, the author of twenty-five poetry collections and eight works of non-fiction.

<sup>7</sup> See Ezra Pound, “Canto LXXXI”.

surely we might ask whether the world of the domestic, and those who manoeuvre therein, connotes not only a lack of freedom but also inherent sentimentalism, reactionary stances, privilege, and the imposition of control over others. In answer to this, I acknowledge that there are shadows of these elements that haunt the domestic, but I also join my voice with that of Susan Fraiman, who, in *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins*, illuminates how domestic spaces and rituals can provide meaning, agency and creativity for those who hover beyond the perimeters of white, heteronormative, bourgeois standards of “normalcy.” Fraiman draws upon the scholarship of authors such as Henri Lefebvre and Luce Giard, who seek to validate the importance of (and comfort found in) patterns/sequences of domestic actions.<sup>8</sup> In discussing Giard’s treatment of French women and cookery, for example, Fraiman refers to the “precisely choreographed sequence of steps” put into play by the household cook before adding that

[i]t is also the case, as Giard explains, that while recipes may be repeated, the outcome is never exactly the same. Cooks must continually adapt to a changing set of circumstances... Revised for practical reasons, recipes are further individualized as a matter of personal style and taste, so that cooking is revealed to be a space not only of repetition but also of creative deviation and reconfiguration: “Style affirms itself, taste distinguishes itself, imagination frees itself and the recipe itself loses significance, becoming little more than an occasion for a free invention... a subtle game of substitutions, abandonments, additions, and borrowings...” (Fraiman 12-13)

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<sup>8</sup> Lefebvre is the author of *The Critique of Everyday Life* (1947). Giard co-authored (with Michel de Certeau and Pierre Mayol) volume 2 (*Living and Cooking*) of *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974), specifically contributing the section entitled “Doing-Cooking” (Fraiman 11).

Like the recipe, the formal poem-space opens itself up as a field of mutable possibilities for the poet; even as it reaches backwards into tradition, it works in the now through the stimulation of musicality and variation. In order to provide appropriate background context to the formal-domestic intersections in the work of Bishop, Brooks, and Sexton, I propose to show how American female poets, from the 17th century onwards, have used the metrical line to relate to the poem as a whole and therefore make statements—clandestine or overt—on their own relationships to convention and restraint. In short, I am inviting my reader to view the line-whole poem binary as perhaps mirroring that of the housekeeper-society binary. By taking this approach, we can see how the formal poem, in the hands of American women poets, becomes, in its totality, not merely a sign of acquiescence to standards of male hegemony and tradition but a complex field for play and the retaking of power. To this end, I will introduce my dissertation by looking at a range of poems by American women, using the lenses of **domicile** (poem as living space), **doing** (poems as representing domestic process), and **division** (poems as sites of split loyalties and/or inner conflicts).

### The Poem as Domicile

You use what you have, you learn to work the structure to create what you need. I don't feel that writing in traditional forms is giving up power, going over to the enemy. The word belongs to no one, the houses built of words belong to no one. We have to take them back from those who think they own them...My idea of traditional forms is that much of our heritage is trapped in them. But the cage can turn into a house if you housekeep it the right way. You housekeep it by working the words just so. (204-205)

With these words, Dominican-American poet Julia Alvarez invites us to consider rethinking the “cage” of the formal poem-space as a house and using this as a platform for instilling and subverting order and making meaning. One of the claims levelled against the use of metre and form is that it is patriarchally ordained. Indeed, it is the male voice which emerges in prominence in earlier American poetry, largely due to the routine lack of exposure for women poets. That being said, it is interesting to see what early American female poets writing on domestic themes did in order to “keep” these houses. The Puritan fathers of the 17th century established strong family-based metaphors in order to coerce settlers into obedience. Crucial to this was the relegation of women to the private domestic sphere. Although lauded for her modesty and industry in the forward to her collection *The Tenth Muse Newly Sprung Up in America* (1650), Anne Bradstreet, in her later poems, manages to reclaim the house as a seat of power, effecting a “bringing out” of private emotions and issues into the public sphere, and affording new agency and authority to the figure of the mother as a shaper of minds and, by extension, a builder of nations (Van Engen 54). In “Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House July 10, 1666”, Bradstreet uses iambic tetrameter to mourn a dwelling place lost at the hands of external forces. The use of the slightly shorter line brings the poem closer to a folk-based storytelling form, allowing the action to “tumble forth” as a compelling narrative. However, despite the tragic elements of the story, it is Bradstreet who remains in control of the poem itself. As a dutiful Christian wife and mother, she pays lip service to the acceptance of domestic misfortune (here, the loss of a house); that being said, her



reaction to the catastrophe is made manifest through the use, in Line 19, of a medial trochee, which transmits to the reader something akin to a hiccup of outrage:

u / u / u / u /  
It was | His own, || it was | not mine.  
u / u / u / u /  
Far be | it that | I should | repine:  
u / u / /u u /  
He might | of all | **justly** | bereft  
u / u / u / u /  
But yet | suffi | cient for | us left. (17-20; emphasis mine)

God may be, in Bradstreet's discourse, "that mighty Architect" (44), but he is neither above reproach nor the sole manipulator of narratives. As both one who operates within the domestic sphere and as a poet, Bradstreet is also a mighty architect, one who both shapes the poem and tells us what to contemplate within it. Through the use of anaphora, Bradstreet is able to present what will never happen again:

/ u u / u / u /  
Under | thy roof | no guest | shall sit  
  
/ u u / u / u /  
Nor at | thy ta | ble eat | a bit  
u / u / u / u /  
No pleas | ant tale | shall e'er | be told,  
u / u / u / u /  
Nor things | recount | ed done | of old.  
u / u / \ / u /  
No cand | le e'er | shall shine | in thee,  
u / \ / u / u /  
Nor bride | groom's voice | e'er heard | shall be. (29-34)

However, in showing us these moments dressed with anaphora's incantatory power, she is remaking the moments, re-animating that which is supposedly no more. A similar reversal occurs when Bradstreet lists what has been lost:

/ u      u /      u /      u /  
Here stood | that trunk, | and there | that chest,  
/ u      u /      u /      u /  
There lay | that store | I count | ed best. (lines 25-26)

In mentioning these objects, Bradstreet is metaphorically “placing” them back in a house, albeit one of her own making, constructed out of words. It is a process made vivid through an initial trochee and strategic use of the words “here” and “there” which, in turn, lead the reader/listener to question *where* here and there actually are and contemplate the poet's own definition of a realm all her own. In short, Bradstreet is reminding us that she, the mother/poet, is the maker of homes; even if the physical house goes up in flames, the poem will remain her kingdom and will always endure.

Directing the reader's attention to what is within the home space (and the poem) is not always an act of emancipation or agency. The early feminist, activist, and writer Charlotte Anna Perkins Gilman produced work that responded to the legacy of the 19th century and, in particular, to the freight placed upon the shoulders of “The True Woman” (the American counterpart to the British concept of “the Angel in the House”) who was expected to eke out her days in tranquil, de-sexed, uncomplaining domestic drudgery

(Ostriker 29).<sup>9</sup> In Gilman’s poem “The Housewife,” “here” is again used to orient the reader’s attention; however, rather than signifying the reclamation of lost domestic space, the word, in the first five lines of Gilman’s poem, hits the ear like the penetrating punch of a nail gun:

/ u u / u / u / u u / u / (uu)  
Here is the | House to | hold me | ||—cradle of | all the race;  
/ u u / u u / (u) / u u / u / (uu)  
Here is my | lord and my | love, || here are my | children dear —  
/ u u / u / u u / / / u / (uu)  
Here is the | House en | closing, || the dear-loved | dwelling | place;  
/ u u / u / u u / u u / u / (uu)  
Why should I | ever | weary || for | aught that I | find not | here? (1-4)

Gilman’s liberal use of the dactyl (which often conjures up “heroic” and “magical” subjects (Finch, *A Poet’s Craft* 394) conveys neither heroism nor transformation but rather (suspended in a breathless hexametrical line) a joint sense of delirium and exhaustion. The home has become an outcrop of the nineteenth-century Capitalist project, demanding unending loyalty, unending labour, and unending production (in this case, of new American girl-children “each with a housewife’s brain” (20) who will perpetuate the cycle of oppression and female passivity). The churning of the triple metre takes the housewife—and the reader—in hopeless circles, rooted by caesurae that refuse to vary in

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<sup>9</sup> The term “Angel of the House” comes from the 1854 Coventry Patmore poem of the same name, which extols the virtues of the untiring and self-effacing Victorian housewife who, through her example, leads her husband and family to a state of spiritual grace.

their placement. This predictability runs through the poem's heart like an iron bar, effectively pinning the housewife to the spot.

Mid-twentieth century poet Amy Clampitt's "Real Estate" presents the reader with a more detached and contemplative view of domestic situations; it leans towards free verse in terms of a metrical template (or lack thereof) while adhering to a mode of structural organization all its own. The poem is composed of twelve "couplets" ending in slant rhymes that register only faintly with the reader/listener. This is a poem about noticing the unnoticeable. On New York City's Third Avenue, the inhabitants of a tenement up for demolition gather to contest (in vain) the efforts of Big Business to oust them and reclaim the space for the purpose of gentrification. The first enjambed nine couplets spill into each other as if to emphasize the fierce momentum of the commercial interests that render the tenants, a faceless mass, irrelevant. But in the tenth couplet, a rupture occurs with the entrance of a holdout tenant who (figuratively) thumbs her nose at the invaders through a simple domestic gesture:

/u /u / u / u / uu /  
Regularly twice a day, || the lingering wraith  
u / / / u / u / \  
within stepped out to shake her dustcloth. (19-20)

The mysterious figure is, admittedly, eventually displaced, along with her neighbours. But Clampitt's isolation of this figure within her own hermetically-sealed iambic tetrametrical couplet directs our attention to the woman as a figure of feminine resistance, made

memorable through both her actions and the poet's use of form. Even as Clampitt ends the poem with the sardonic exclamation "Hail, real estate!" (24), it is the unforgettable duster who emerges as victorious, staying with us, even as the U-Haul drives off with her worldly possessions.

### The Act of Doing

As Fraiman has noted, and as we have seen in Clampitt's poem, domestic routine may indeed be a conduit for agency or even rebellion. White middle-class female poets of the antebellum and postbellum periods, referred to by Finch as "the poetesses" ("Mother Dickinson" 58), were expected to adhere to social and religious codes, effectively effacing themselves through unending domestic labour and the negation of both sexual desire and intellectual ambition (Ostriker 31). Many of these "poetesses" used their works as formally-conservative spaces in which collective values were pooled, the individual ego was ignored entirely, and an (often heavy-handed) emphasis on the heart (the sentimental) and its connection to domestic duty was accorded primacy (Finch "Confessions of a Postmodern Poetess" 124). One of the most explicit examples of this poetic model in action can be found in "Women's Rights" by Rebekah Gumpert Hyneman.<sup>10</sup> In the poem, Hyneman situates herself as the ultimate traditionalist, anticipating perhaps a potential tide of proto-feminist protest; she affirms that a woman's

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<sup>10</sup> Hyneman (1812-1875) was born into a mixed Christian-Jewish family and adopted Orthodox Judaism after her marriage. The author of *The Leper and Other Poems* (1853), as well as short stories for adults and children, she oriented most of her work around ideas of faith and moral conservatism (Lichtenstein,).

lot (her “right”) involves domestic labour, the education of the young, caring for the sick and the shepherding of loved ones into death, as well as self-abnegation—the wife “is a flower that blossoms best unseen” (25)—and the provision of good moral example to the spiritually vulnerable (“point[ing] the shining path of virtue’s track” [15]). American women poets of the 19th century would eventually find themselves venturing beyond the domestic sphere in terms of subject matter (temperance, abolitionism, the plight of the Indigenous peoples), but the sentimental impulse would lead most of these poets to appeal (although sometimes, in less intense ways) to the heart and the heart’s duty, even as their “doing” moved further and further afield (Bennett 606). Closer to the end of the 19th century, however, attention was drawn by early feminists to the empty labour dumped on the housewife’s shoulders that allied it with the injustices of the greater Capitalist project. As we have seen in Gilman’s “The Housewife,” the “perfect” home could be transformed into a gothic site of horror and entrapment (Fraiman 18); however, it can also be viewed as a place of injustice and illogical expectations. In Gilman’s “The Mother’s Charge,” the poet takes up the sentimental trope of the dying loved one and uses it as a platform for

expounding upon the senselessness of the housewife’s unending unpaid labour.<sup>11</sup> The base metre here is the “large carrier” of iambic pentameter, the scheme often associated with logic and order (Bogan 239). However, Gilman’s liberal use of spondaic, trochaic and anapaestic variations in the line, coupled with the “stop and start” quality imparted by the combination of caesurae and dashes, conveys a hallucinatory sense of inner disorder:

u / u / u / u / u /  
 If girls | are treat | ed like | your friends | they stay—  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 They stay | and treat | you like | their friends— || | the way  
 u / / / u \ u / u /  
 To make | home hap | py is | to keep | a jar—  
 u / u / uu / u / u /  
 And save | the pret | tiest piec | es for | the star  
 uu / u / / / / / u /  
 In the mid | dle— || | blue’s | too dark— || | all silk | is best—  
 u / u / u / u \ u /  
 And don’t | forget | the corn | ers— || | when | they’re dressed  
 / u u / u / u / u /  
 Put them | on ice — || | and al | ways wash | the chest.  
 / / u / u / u / u /  
 Three times | a day, || | the wind | ows ev | ery week—  
 u / \ / u u / u / u /  
 We need | more flo | ur— || the bed | room ceil | ings leak—

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<sup>11</sup> In most 19th-century antebellum and postbellum literature, this sub-genre (which was preceded by the elegiac poems of Anne Bradstreet, Phillis Wheatley, and Sarah Wentworth Morton) usually deals with the death of a child, requiring of the female speaker/character a display of quiet fortitude and subsequent affirmation of acceptable moral and religious values. Examples include Hyneman’s “Women’s Rights” as well as Lydia Huntley Sigourney’s “Death of An Infant”, Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard’s “One morn I left him in his bed”, and Jane Johnstone Schoolcraft’s “Sweet Willy”. The quality of these infant elegies varies somewhat. Unintentionally comical examples can be found in the works of Lucy Larcom, such as “A Little Cavalier” and “What the Train Ran Over”.

u / u u / u / u / u /  
 It's bet | ter than on | ion— || keep | the boys | at home—  
 / u u u / u / / / u /  
 Garden | ing is good— || | a load, || | three loads | of loam—(17-27)

The surreal jumble of images representative of a short-circuiting mind presents some truly alarming suggested syntheses: girls in jars and on ice, boys being buried, ceilings leaking onion. Here, Gilman is suggesting, through the marriage/clash of content, image, and form, everything—inside the home and potentially outside as well—will fall into disorder if the current patriarchal order and distribution of labour are not changed.

In Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "I Sit and Sew," the speaker similarly takes issue with the incongruous nature of a domestic situation; in this case, it is the desire to enter public service (as a volunteer tending to the wounded in the First World War) which acts as a motivator. Unlike Hyneman's uniformly-fashioned lyrical work, which melds domestic duty and feminine (supposed) desire and agency, Dunbar-Nelson's three-stanza poem tussles against itself; its base metre of iambic pentameter is scattered with trochaic and spondaic substitutions that jar the poem's flow, both awakening images of death and chaos beyond the private home space and signifying a refusal to accept prescribed duty:

u / u / u / u / u /  
 I sit | and sew | — || a use | less task | it seems,  
 u / / / u / / / u /  
 My hands | grown tired, || | my head | weighed down | with dreams—  
 u / u\ u / u / u / u /  
 The pan | oply | of war, || | the mar | tial tread | of men,  
 / / / / / u u / u /  
 Grim-faced, || | stern-eyed, || | gazing | beyond | the ken



u / u / \ / u / \ /  
Of les | ser souls, || | whose eyes | have not | seen Death...(1-5)

Similarly, the insertion of two hexametrical lines in the poem (one of which is Line 3 in the above excerpt) demonstrates Dunbar-Nelson’s refusal to “stay within bounds”—she is taking it upon herself to venture outwards, even if the situation in the narrative says that she cannot. As an African-American poet, her resistance to the edicts of a “neat” poem, a “neat” domestic life, and a neat adherence to “one’s proper place” carries extra resonances.

Possessed of a solid feminist agenda, Carolyn Kizer is known for her own campaign against subjugation; in reading her work, we become aware of her exasperation/fascination with the “poetesses” of the 19th century, as well as her acerbic reflections on female desire (“Afterthoughts of Donna Elvira”) and female duty/identity (“Pro Femina”).<sup>12</sup> In Kizer’s wonderfully cutting “Mud Soup,” the poet hijacks the metrical template (trochaic tetrameter) of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Song of Hiawatha” in order to tell the tale of an ill-advised scheme to follow a *New York Times* recipe (Finch, *A Poet’s Craft* 379-380). It would appear, from the start, that Kizer has both her domestic and her formal ducks in a row; she has assembled her ingredients and selected a metrical scheme that carries with it both canonical heft (Longfellow) and driving momentum (this is also the metre of the *Kalevala*, the Karelian-Finnish epic).

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<sup>12</sup> For more on Kizer’s engaged but fraught relationship with the “poetesses” of the nineteenth century, I recommend Finch’s excellent article “Carolyn Kizer and the Chain of Women” in *The Body of Poetry*.

However, in reading the first stanza, it becomes evident that, preparations aside, Kizer’s outcome may not match her best intentions:

/ u / / / u / u  
Had the | ham bone, || had the | lentils,  
/ u / / / u / /  
Got to | meat store | for the | salt pork,  
/ u / uu / u /uu  
Got to | grocery | for the | celery,  
/ u / u / u / u  
Had the | onions, || had the | garlic,  
/ u / u / u / u  
Borrowed | carrots | from the | neighbor.  
/ u /u / u / u  
Had the | spices, || had the | parsley.  
/ \ /u / u / /  
One big | kettle | I had | not got;  
/ u / u / u u / u  
Borrowed | pot and | lid from the | landlord. (1-8)

Kizer intentionally instills an air of clumsiness by using awkward phrasing (“meat store” instead of “butcher”) and wrenched metre (“One big kettle I had not got”—a line made even more hilarious through its archaic syntax). Furthermore, the speaker’s lack of a pot—the crucial instrument!—in the eighth line has her literally rummaging around in a hurry, the delay represented by the inclusion of a dactyl in the third foot.

What kind of soup, then, does this methodical effort produce? On this, Kizer bluntly fills us in (“Tastes like mud the finished product. / Looks like mud the finished product.” [34-35]). The domestic experiment has come to its conclusion. Throwing up her hands, the poet resolves to

/ u / u / u / u  
Flush the | dinner | down dis | posal,  
/ u / u / / / u  
Say to | hell with | ham bone, || | lentils,  
/ / / (u) /u \ (u)  
New York | Times | reci | pe.  
/ u / u / / / u  
Purchase | Campbell's. || | Just add | water.  
/ u / u /u \ (u)  
Concen | trate on | poet | ry. (38-42)

On the surface, the poet is making a flamboyant and funny decision to eschew the grind of middle-class domestic practice and genteel rituals of “foodie-ism” (trumpeted here by the urbane *New York Times*) and sign on for the convenient meal options supposedly favoured by those who use their time for other things.<sup>13</sup> However, there are additional layers to this outwardly satirical poem. When Kizer reminds herself to “[c]oncentrate on poetry,” we can make the metaphorical leap and imagine that she is probably referring to *her own poetry*—rather than remain a follower of the “poetic recipes” laid out by a male-governed tradition. And beneath that lies the question of how imitation intersects with appropriation. When Kizer ends “Mud Soup” with:

/ u / u /u / u  
By the | shores of | Gitche | Gumee  
/ u / u / u /u  
You can | bet the | banks were | muddy,

---

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noticing how Kizer underlines the lionized status of this cultural edifice by omitting an unstressed syllable and therefore providing a “rest” that adds additional ironic ceremony to the line.

/ \ / u /u / (u)  
Not like | Isle of | Innis | free. (43-45)

we cannot help but consider how the unrepentantly political Kizer might regard the “muddiness” of Longfellow’s own colonialist approach to the appropriation of the figure of Hiawatha. Even as she finishes by switching her formal allegiance to W.B. Yeats, Kizer is doing a sharp job of pointing out, through a domestic setting and trope, the kitchen disasters that befall so many modern poets attempting to ape canonical works rather than reinvent and generate new approaches.<sup>14</sup>

### The Poem Divided

Kizer’s poem illuminates for the reader the division between expectations regarding domestic and creative inspiration/motivation (how we “should” use models and follow processes) versus potential outcomes. Poetry that deals with the domestic often touches on the existence—and complications—of further forms of division, be they with regard to physical space or the division of the self, the way that domestic obligation either places women in a dilemma of identity or else allows them to own a conflicting/complementary separateness from their domestic selves. Oftentimes these different divisions intersect.

For 19th-century housewives loaded down with the ideological burden of becoming a True Woman, fitting into the mould of endless sacrifice and self-denial meant

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<sup>14</sup> The last line of “Mud Soup” refers to Yeats’s 1890 poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”.

refashioning oneself as an intermediary between the earthly and the heavenly (Bennett 593). Emily Dickinson, in her poem classified as “199” (“I’m ‘wife’—I’ve finished that”), wryly uses a line that is a foot shorter than that of her preferred medium of the hymn metre, revealing, in chaste hyphen-fractured shards of thought, the Wife’s rationale that she has ascended to a covetable state of being:

u / u / u /  
I’m “wife” || —I’ve fin | ished that—  
u / u /  
That oth | er state—  
u / u / u /  
I’m Czar— || I’m “Wo | man” now—  
u / u /  
It’s saf | er so— (1-4)

For declarations so superficially assertive, there is a clipped air to Dickinson’s discourse, even as she takes on the trappings of masculinity and royalty (“I’m Czar”). There is a “foreignness” to this new incarnation, a sense that, for all the illusions of power, there is no going back. In the second stanza, Dickinson’s halting hyphens diminish in number as the speaker reflects on what has been gained—and lost:

u / u / / /  
How odd | the Girl’s | life looks  
u / u / u /  
Behind | this soft | Eclipse—  
u / u / \ /  
I think | that Earth | feels so  
u / u / u /  
To folks | in Hea | ven—|| now— (5-8)

This reduction in the number of caesurae telegraphs to us that, for all the grandeur of an ascension to “Heaven,” the world of the Girl and its attendant freedoms has not been given up easily. However, in the third quatrain, the speaker finds herself, as if in desperation, attempting to lay down a Rubicon (via more caesurae) between what has been taken up and what has been let go:

\ /        u /    u        /  
This be || | ing com | fort— || | then  
      u /    u /        u /  
That oth | er kind— || | was pain—  
      u /    u /  
But why | compare?  
      u        /        /        /  
I’m “Wife”! || | Stop there! (9-12)

The final line, jagged with a panicked last snap of its caesura (and a spondaic command), is redolent with the aroma of “Oh God, what have I done?” The ascent to Heaven is, in fact, a descent.

Nobody knew this better, perhaps, than Sarah J. Piatt. A Southerner and the wife of poet J.J. Piatt—considered by many to be the American equivalent to Coventry Patmore—Piatt (surprisingly) refused to buoy up the concept of The True Woman but instead took it to task in verse which is considered to be markedly more nuanced and innovative than that of her poetess sisters (Bennett 592-593). In “The Descent of the Angel,” the eponymous Angel-in-Waiting appears as a kind of doomed *dea ex machina*, drifting downwards in her silks, laces, and impractical shoes to “take the keys”:

/ u u / / / u /  
“This is | the house. || | Come, || take | the keys.  
u / u / u / u /  
Romance | and trav | el here | must end.”  
/ u u / / / u /  
Out of | the clouds, || | not quite | at ease,  
u / u / u / u /  
I saw | the pret | ty bride | descend;  
u / u / u / u /  
With sat | in sand | als, || fit | alone  
u / u / u / u /  
To glide | in air, || | she touched | the stone. (1-6)

But here, the keys hold no promise of admitting the wife to an exalted state. Piatt’s cleanly-structured two-stanza iambic tetrametrical poem shows us that the division between the heavenly and the earthly is a straightforward one. In the first stanza, save for variations in the first and third lines (emphasized), the metre remains regular and whatever caesurae there are hover around the middle of the line. In the second stanza, the variations are even fewer in number:

u / u / u / u /  
A thing | to fade | through wed | ding lace  
u / u / u / u /  
From silk | and scents, || | through priest | and ring,  
/ u u / u / u /  
Floated | across | that earth | ly place  
u / u / u / u /  
Where life | must be | an earth | ly thing.  
u / u / u / u /  
An earth | ly voice | was in | her ears,  
u / u / u / u /  
Her eyes | awoke | to earth | ly tears. (7-12)

For all her youth and sylphlike grace, for all her love of “[r]omance and travel,” the Angel in Piatt’s poem is not one who is allowed to rebel. Rather, her fate, signalled by the use of parallel structure, the rumbling repetition of the word “earthly” (which hits the ear like shovelfuls of earth landing on a coffin lid) and, above all, the relentless, genteel sweep of the metre, metaphorically swallows her up. Did Piatt, the wife of a male poet who fervently supported these traditional domestic moral and societal models, feel similarly “swallowed up”? The question is worth considering.

In the contemporary African-American poet Rita Dove’s “Daystar,” Beulah, an exhausted young mother, also finds herself earth-bound in the everyday and therefore attempts to seek tranquility in a modest slice of Heaven of her own (idealized in the text as “a little room for thinking”). Dove’s poem operates as a free-verse work with a solid rhythmic pull. Occasionally, lines of (sometimes varied) iambic pentameter appear; when they do, it is usually to signify moments where the mundane invades the woman’s ad hoc sanctuary:

u / uu / u / u / (u)  
She want | ed a lit | tle room | for thinking:  
**u / u / u / u / u /**  
**But she | saw dia | pers steam | ing on | the line,**

.....  
**u u / u / u / uu / uu /**  
**She had half | an hour, || | at best, || | before Li | za appeared**  
**/ u u u / uu /**  
Pouting | from the top | of the stairs. (1-2, 12-13; emphasis mine)



In her essay “Making Shattered Faces Whole,” Finch draws attention to Audre Lorde’s similar use of the pentameter as a marker of outrage, an expression of estrangement from the true self (149-150). However, the pentameter also finds itself reinvented in Lorde as a means of asserting that same self. In the last four lines of “Coal,” the poet locates the black body in the earth, reinvesting it with natural integrity and brilliance; to do so, she nestles “[her] word” within this most superficially patriarchal of metres:

/ u u / u / u / u / (u)  
Love is | a word, || | anoth | er kind | of open.  
u u / u / /u u / u /  
As the dia | mond comes | |into | a knot | of flame  
u u / u / u / u u / u /  
I am black | because | I come | from the earth’s | inside  
\ / u / u / u u / u /  
now take | my word | for jewel | in the op | en light. (23-26)

Returning to Dove’s “Daystar,” we find Beulah, in the poem’s last line—also in (varied) iambic pentameter—asserting her imagination’s ability to remove her from the realm of domestic obligation (including loveless sex), enabling her to “think of the place that was hers” (19), transforming her into a nothing that resembles more of a zen haven than an act of self-abnegation—in other words:

\ / u \ u / u / u /  
pure noth | ing in | the mid | dle of | |the day. (22)

Thus it is that Dove, like Lorde before her, manages to harness the pentameter in order to, in the parlance of contemporary poet Marilyn Nelson, “own the masters”: use the metrical

tools of white patriarchal predecessors in order to express authority—beyond the bounds of the home and the bounds of the society of the oppressor (12).

Kizer, whom we have seen in full satirical flower in “Mud Soup,” examines the divisions facing her own mother with a greater degree of gravitas (and metrical fluidity) in her poem “The Intruder.” The poem’s subject is a curious and compassionate proto-hippie of sorts, torn between her love for nature and her adherence to domestic order, as she finds herself overcome by compassion for a wounded bat. It is not the heavenly which attracts the mother in this case, but rather the elemental and uncultivated, that which—as witnessed and experienced by the Romantic tradition—appeals to the id, the subconscious. Kizer’s poem stands out neatly on the page as three ten-line stanzas. However, it also struggles to find its own wildness. The first line, for example, reads, in isolation, as amphibrachic tetrameter:

u / u      u / u      u / u      u / (u)  
My mother— || preferring | the strange to | the tame: (1)

The next few lines veer into free-verse territory, while maintaining a starting accentual flavour that reminds the reader/listener of everything from Anglo-Saxon poetry to the trochaic chant of Macbeth’s three witches:<sup>15</sup>

/      /      /      / u      /      /  
Dove-note, || bone marrow, || deer dung,  
\      /u      u / u      u / u /  
Frog’s belly distended with finny young,

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<sup>15</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*: IV.i 10-19; 35-38.

/ / / u u / / / /  
Leaf-mold wilderness, || harebell, || toadstool,  
/ / / / u / u /  
Odd, || small snakes roving through the leaves,  
u /u / u / u /u / /  
Metallic beetles rambling over stones: || all  
/ u /u u  
Wild and natural! .....(2-7)

Picking up the bat, the mother attempts to graft her maternal instinct onto this wounded creature supposedly in need of human deliverance—note how Kizer states that the bat is “*depended* from her pinched thumb” (11; italics mine). It is then, however, that the speaker and the mother realize that the animal is infested with lice. Complicating the emotions of both speaker and reader is the fact the bat is, in itself, a nurturing figure for the lice that are “[n]ested within the wing-pits” and “cozily suck[ing] and snooz[ing]” (17). The mother’s reaction is a mixture of terror and disgust; she drops the bat (now referred to as a “thing”), and the family cat nonchalantly takes it outside, presumably to finish it off. The division here is a double one: there is the realm of nature and the realm of the cultivated (mirrored by the interplay of free verse and form). However, there is also, perhaps, a division between the realm of the nurturer and that of the nurtured. How well, we may imagine Kizer wondering, do we know the beings that depend on us and vice versa? What erroneous forces of wildness (“spitting tongue, an odor, talon, claw / To sting or soil benevolence” (26-27) divide parent from child? Whatever the answers, Kizer ties up this play of shifting divisions with the icily prim finality of the poem’s two final iambic pentametrical lines:

u / u u / u / u / u /  
She swept | to the kitch | en. || Turn | ing on | the tap  
u / u / u / u / u /  
She washed | and washed | the pi | ty from | her hands. (29-30)

Like Lorde and Dove, Kizer reserves the use of iambic pentameter to *make a point*. In this case, the point is not to express anger or self-assertion or self-transformation but rather to signify the ritual of taking sides, of fully choosing allegiance with the “clean” world whose animals are cuddly and loving and whose narratives (domestic narratives included) match their equally “clean” ten-line stanzas. But Kizer’s poem is not a paean to powerlessness. Like Bradstreet long before her, she establishes herself through this metrical/non-metrical poem as not just a housekeeper of form but another “mighty architect,” a shaper of our perception of domestic anxiety. Herein lies the potential of the metrical line, the stanza, anaphora, all the “housekeeping” tools that women writing the domestic have had available to them because of—and in spite of—the constraints and the miseries that govern their lives. And it is from here that we turn to Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Anne Sexton to examine how each of these groundbreaking mid-20th-century poets used formal devices as a way to signal anxiety and resistance to the readers—and the poets of the future—that they knew would be waiting for them.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “My crumb / My mansion”: Regularity, Intimacy, and Privacy in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop

In 1961, Elizabeth Bishop launched into the relatively lucrative extra-poetic project of writing the text for *Brazil*, a volume in Time-Life’s World Library Series. The poet’s vision was exacting, and, as a result, her engagement with the Time-Life editors was decidedly fractious; she disagreed with most of the edits that were sent back from her original drafts (many of which were performed by student interns) and prickled when higher-ups questioned her knowledge of her then-adopted country. The version (of what Bishop referred to as “that blasted book”) which eventually made it into print was roundly disowned by its author (Marshall 168; Fountain and Brazeau 172-173); however, its point of departure, the first chapter, “A Warm and Reasonable People,” sheds valuable light on what seems to have most intensely preoccupied Bishop as a writer and as an individual. The typical mid-20th century travel/geographical survey book might very well begin with “the facts”: location, history, attractive highlights, perhaps a debunking of popular stereotypes. Bishop’s own approach is unusual. She begins by presenting the story of Conceiçãozinha (“Little Conception”), an infant girl abducted from a Rio hospital, the anguish swirling around her plight, and the nationwide jubilation at her discovery and return. “Children are almost always wanted ... and adored,” Bishop tells us about this country and its love of family, its unusual redefinition of domestic bonds embodied in concepts such as “daughters/sons/brothers/sisters of creation,” the practice of partial adoption that crossed lines of race and class (“A Warm and Reasonable People” 11-13).

Bishop's own life had been a paradox; she sensed in herself (and instinctively gravitated towards) the status of meticulous outside traveller-observer while, on the other hand, craving love and the comforts of belonging to someone or something. Her childhood, marked by the death of a father, the institutionalization of a mother, and transit between two sets of grandparents, had not been defined by the feeling of being “wanted ... and adored” but rather of having been an accidental and inconvenient appendage. Effectively rootless and further sensing herself marginalized by her attraction to women as well as her dependence on alcohol, Bishop found in Brazil not only the love of her life—the socially prominent landscape designer and self-taught architect Lota de Macedo Soares—but also release from what Vidyan Ravinthiran terms the “deadening proprieties” of North American life into an environment which made her finally feel part of a surrogate “home,” one which operated on its own cultural, social, sexual, and artistic terms (Millier, *Flawed Light* 135; Ranvinthiran 115). Feeling herself a daughter/sister of creation in Brazil, Bishop naturally chose to introduce the country to the unseasoned world along (refashioned) domestic lines.

This is an unconventional but, I feel, appropriate place to begin in unpacking how Bishop's use of form in her poetry practice intersects with perspectives on the domestic. When carefully read, her work reveals a process that embodies and contemplates the inherent power in being estranged from and re-situated in domestic environments. It is important to note that when we speak of the “domestic” in Elizabeth Bishop's work, we are not referring to forensic reports of ordinary home routines. Although she herself

recalled with fondness the domestic skills practiced by her relations in Nova Scotia and prided herself on her own (particularly her cooking),<sup>16</sup> Bishop bristled at a later generation of female poets who regaled their readership (in true confessional spirit) with descriptions of the minutiae of domestic practice.<sup>17</sup> In her unfortunately abortive tenure as poetry critic for *The New Yorker*, Bishop complained often about confessionalism,<sup>18</sup> political poetry, and “why it was that female poets write so often about silly domestic tasks and situations. Could they not go for walks, as male poets did?” (Millier, *Life and the Meaning of It*<sup>19</sup> 425). In my opinion, this is not so much a rejection of the integrity of domestic practice as it is an example of how Bishop privileged the primacy of the

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<sup>16</sup> On account of Bishop’s having commandeered the kitchen at Samambaia, Lota came to affectionately refer to Bishop as “Cookie” (Marshall 108).

<sup>17</sup> I would like to stress that, although Bishop regarded this kind of writing as tedious, she held great respect for the practice of motherhood, even as viewed through a contemporary feminist lens. In 1969, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University attempted to block the admission to one of Bishop’s classes of Anne Hussey, a mature student, on account of her status as a married woman with children. An infuriated Bishop intervened, and Hussey reclaimed her rightful seat in the class. In another anecdote conveyed by Monroe Engel, Bishop, at one of her parties at her Lewis Wharf apartment in Boston in the early seventies, made a point of telling Adrienne Rich how she had been impacted by the younger poet’s prose book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* (Fountain and Brazeau 310-311, 329).

<sup>18</sup> The term “confessional poetry”, coined in 1959 by the critic M.L. Rosenthal, was applied to a school of work which, according to Diane Wood Middlebrook, flourished between 1959 and 1966. It used direct, idiomatic language to discuss intimate personal experience and phenomena including, but not limited to, sexuality, childhood trauma, and mental illness (“An Introduction to Confessional Poetry”).

<sup>19</sup> Hereinafter referred to as *Life*.

Aristotelian concept of *technê* (τέχνη)—craft, the act of doing and making<sup>20</sup>—over merely engaging in therapeutic shared confession. This chapter seeks to draw attention to how Bishop’s engagement with *technê*—embodied in the form and metrical contours of her work—might be seen as metaphorically mirroring her engagement with home-loss, home-seeking, and home-ordering, as well as her underlying anxiety about all three. For Bishop, a queer woman seemingly cast adrift by personal circumstance, *technê*, as it pertained to poetic craft, was a sustaining force. And it is here that I will take a leap and venture to say that we might view this intense engagement with formal craft as a shadow extension of what Fraiman calls “shelter writing.” Although Bishop held disparaging views on the confessional practice of sharing the intimate details of one’s life—including domestic practice—her attention to form and detail in her poetry shows her engagement with constructing poem-spaces that are sites of comfort and contemplation. In this way, Bishop fulfills the mandates of shelter writing by providing “blow-by-blow accounts of ... efforts to make and keep house” (Fraiman 25). These accounts, shaped into articulate and technically meticulous works, function not as “houses” that contain and suppress trauma but as “homes,” in which lines operate as organizable spaces or elements and human yearning animates and burnishes form. Entering these spaces, we learn about not only Bishop’s family history, anxieties and desires but also her view as a woman and an outsider to the conformity-privileging environment of the mid-20th century.

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<sup>20</sup> It is important to keep in mind the distinction between this and *epistêmê* (ἐπιστήμη), or theory —“the domain of ‘knowledge’” (Parry).



When Bishop speaks of “go[ing] for walks, as male poets did” (i.e. moving through the world of exteriors, observing, recording, and then crafting one’s observations), it is natural to feel taken aback at this apparent outright rejection of female creative imperatives. However, in Bishop’s cosmology, the new and evolved use of form required a throwing off of traditional feminine poetic agendas. Her attention to *technê* was ever-constant, though it underwent something of a quantum shift between the dawn of her professional career in 1927 and her death in 1979. Here, we sense a moving away from the stringencies of more ordered “conventional” metrical patterns (informed by the deep—one might say almost parental—influence of poets including George Herbert, William Wordsworth, and Gerard Manley Hopkins) towards more hybrid approaches. These later poems, although they contain the vividness of prose (what Ravinthiran terms the “American turn to the vernacular”) and suggest a greater willingness to touch upon the personal, refuse to entirely abandon traditional connections to the lyric and form in general (Ravinthiran 8).

Bishop’s coming into consciousness as a writer was forged in the crucible of not only a tumultuous personal background but also a paradoxical confluence of literary influences. On the one side was the legacy of the High Modernists (T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, H.D, and Amy Lowell, as well as Bishop’s mentor and close friend Marianne Moore) who rejected form and emotionality. On the other was that of the early 20th-century poets (Sara Teasdale, Eleanor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Leonie Adams, Isabella Gardner, and Louise Bogan) who had revived female lyric tradition while

attempting to avoid (or, at the very least, modulate) sentimentality. By the time Bishop's career was beginning to blossom, with the 1946 release of *North and South*, the zeitgeist of the American psyche had been shaped by the socio-political tensions emerging from the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> It was a time in which the rigidity of nationalism, economic bullishness, heteronormativity, and suspicion of the "other" held sway. The influence on American poetics had resulted in social and ideological structures being challenged and subverted. This hybridity finds articulation in Steven Axelrod's "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: The Cold War Poetics of Bishop, Lowell and Ginsberg"; here, Axelrod makes mention of how Cold War poetry

... suggests that sexual, psychic, and linguistic energies are continually in flux and capable of defying the conventional premises that would keep them in place. In the era Alan Nadel labeled "containment culture" and Tony Engelhardt called "victory culture", Cold War poetry gnaws away at the containment structures and triumphalism of normative sexuality, mood, and language. In its idiosyncrasy, its capacity to surprise, and its daring rebellions, Cold War poetry suggests numerous complexities obscured by the one big story we have been telling ourselves about modernism and postmodernism. It's time to dwell on the ruptures and resistances that mark American poetry in the Cold War era. (Axelrod 2)

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<sup>21</sup> The Cold War, which lasted from 1946 to 1991, refers to a period of conflict that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union and their allies. Embodying the concept which George Orwell described as "the peace that is no peace", the Cold War was marked by ideological conflict, struggles to assert control on the global stage, espionage, a mounting arms race, and proxy wars (including the Korean War and the war in Vietnam). Closer to home, on American soil, this clash between Communist and Capitalist ideologies resulted in an atmosphere of enforced conformity and suspicion directed by anyone who demonstrated—or could be presented as demonstrating—Communist sympathies (Blakemore).

Bishop has her own fixations on domestic containment *and* is known as a skilful practitioner of poetic form; however, she, too, tempers her longings and artistic practice with “ruptures and resistances.” In correspondence with peer and close friend Robert Lowell, she once referred to herself as “a minor female Wordsworth”; rather than take this as a self-ironizing statement of bad habits, one can consider this phrase in relation to how the poet uses form to create order and build metaphorical “homes.” “Minor,” if one thinks of the word in musical terms, implies not a diminishment of stature but alternative intervals between major notes; these intervals express “slanted” resonances and introduce a “shadow element” into structure and musicality (Ravinthiran xiv). This formal shadow element that characterizes Bishop’s work reflects the fluid and unconventional way in which she sought and inhabited domestic spaces. To read and absorb a Bishop poem is to be in the presence of dual energies—modern-traditional, male-female, outside-inside, prosaic-lyrical, embraced-adrift—that are both in conflict and symbiotic. Her work eschews the confessional impulse, which was wielded in the works of contemporaries, including John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Sexton, and Lowell. It instead expresses emotional connections to others and the world at large by focussing on the seen and experienced thing. Bishop, in the words of friend Mary McCarthy, “put forward her conviction that anything in a poem was true, that it was there because it had happened” (Fountain and Brazeau 153). This interweaving of craft and actuality creates a simultaneous sense of intimacy and removal that stands alone from the “tell-all” mandate of confessional poetry and the impersonal distancing of the Modernist aesthetic. Art

becomes the conduit for control; patterns within the poems themselves put on display a high-stakes ritual of evoking alienation/misfitting while recreating order through selective repetition, slant rhyme and metrical variation. A suitable guiding three-prong metaphor for how domestic alliances and the anxiety around them dovetail with Bishop's use of form finds articulation in Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau's *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* in which the authors speak of the poet and "a lifetime spent searching for the regularity, intimacy and privacy of domestic life" (2). Firstly, form in Bishop's works provides a model—albeit a flexible one—of **regularity**, which acts as a vehicle for exploring difficult emotions resulting from trauma while asserting a link to tradition. Secondly, it operates as a means of conveying **intimacy**; this not only implies closeness with a beloved other or a parent/guardian figure but also acts to consider the outsider's compassionate vision of the world and their aptitude for micro-observation. Finally, it helps amplify a sense of **privacy**. Here, I use this term loosely, as I mean "privacy" to convey both a protected realm which allows the outsider-poet to find solace from the judgments of the greater world and the capacity to assert selfness and authenticity while privileging a sense of mystery that allows the poem to function outside the limited realm of the individual-confessional and be readily identifiable to a range of experiences. My overall aim here is not to focus exclusively on the anxiety surrounding Bishop's search for reliable and comforting domestic environments. Rather, it is to add my voice to that of Ravinthiran when he asserts, "If much Bishop scholarship has treated her as a victim of her upbringing, haunted by homelessness and mother-loss, it is only

through careful attention to form and tone that we can find a different vision of an actively-thinking poet curious about herself and the world” (25). Indeed, I propose that we go even further by examining how the physical and sonic dimensions of Bishop’s poem-spaces, viewed in the light of her past traumas, both reflect the poet’s coping with estrangement from home comforts and show her in the process of rebuilding virtual “home spaces”—as well as questioning the notion of what it is to be *at home*, both in poetic spaces and in the world at large.

“The ties were too close together/ or maybe too far apart”: Form and Regularity

Throughout her personal and professional life, Bishop longed for but seemed eternally eluded by regularity and consistency. Plain bad luck had a good deal to do with it. Born in 1911 into a middle-class family in Worcester, Massachusetts, Bishop was prevented, by a chain of circumstances, from partaking in what might have been considered a “normal” childhood. Her American father, William Bishop, suffered from Bright’s disease (now known as acute/chronic nephritis), an incurable kidney condition; he was to succumb to the illness in October 1911, when Elizabeth was eight months old (Fountain and Brazeau 3). Her Canadian mother, Gertrude Bishop (née Bulmer), blindsided by grief, became increasingly distant and distracted as she and Elizabeth travelled between William’s family in Massachusetts and the Bulmer family in Nova Scotia.<sup>22</sup> In 1914, Gertrude began to experience the first of a series of episodes of violent

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<sup>22</sup> Bishop’s maternal family name, (Bulmer) is given, in some sources, the alternate spelling Boomer.

mental distress, which culminated, in 1916, in her being committed by the Bulmers to the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth. Following her mother's institutionalization, Bishop was to find herself in a permanent state of domestic instability and disconnect as she travelled from the home of the Bulmers in Great Village (where she lived happily until 1917) to the more affluent and decidedly sterner Bishop household in Worcester and then, finally, to the working-class home of her Aunt Maud and Uncle George Shepherdson in Revere in 1918. In 1927, at the instigation of her uncle and guardian, John Bishop, the 16-year-old Elizabeth was sent to board at the Walnut Hill School in Natick, Massachusetts. From here, she went on to study at Vassar College before launching into a peripatetic adult existence that included brief tenures in (amongst other places) Paris, New York, Key West, Mexico, Seattle, and Boston. In 1951, on the heels of a low period spent in residency at Yaddo and as Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., Bishop's life took an unexpected turn for the better when she set off on an extended world trip and ended up staying in Brazil, having fallen in love with Lota and settled with her at Fazenda Samambaia in Petrópolis. The fifteen years between 1951 and 1966 would constitute what Bishop herself called the happiest years of her life, a brief oasis of relative domestic security that enabled her, amongst other things, to revisit in detail the intermittently content Nova Scotia portion of her childhood (Fountain and Brazeau 126; Millier, *Life* 252).

Despite this and other lacunae of relative calm, regularity would continue to be a problematic factor in Bishop's life, something she needed and craved and would end up

internalizing. There were undoubtedly specific elements of her behaviour in which regularity verged on rigidity: people who encountered the poet noted how, perhaps as a defensive mechanism, she adopted a mannered way of speaking and behaving. Elizabeth Seaver Helfman, the sister of one of Bishop's admirers, notes how Bishop's speech had "a slightly literary flavor." Publisher Robert Giroux commented on her "good manners." At the same time, friend Joseph Frank speculated about her upbringing and how she seemed "more Canadian and more English than she was American," remarking on how she remained "much more rigorous in some deep moral and social sense than the ordinary American." Friend Eunice Clark put Bishop's demeanour and outlook into the clearest and most succinct light perhaps when she stated that the poet "represented the classical thing" (Fountain and Brazeau 154, 116, 49). Despite vicissitudes of experience that included childhood abandonment, neglect, and abuse,<sup>23</sup> which would give way later to depression, alcohol addiction, romantic intrigue, and professional struggle, Bishop's self-curation was exacting, even as it made room for authenticity and eccentricity.

Form, it would seem, was more than a posture or a guiding template for Bishop; the stakes were high. Throughout her life, beauty had been the great alchemic force that had transformed the horrifying into the semi-manageable, mitigating trauma and, despite her ambivalence about faith, opening a window onto the eternal. An episode from the

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<sup>23</sup> From the age of eight, Bishop suffered physical and sexual mistreatment at the hands of her uncle, George Shepherdson, who was married to her mother's sister, Aunt Maud. In addition to fondling her in the bath, Shepherdson would threaten her with violence; on one particular occasion, he seized young Elizabeth by the hair and dangled her over the railing of a second-floor balcony (Marshall 18-19).

poet's childhood in Nova Scotia—the reenactment of a childhood playmate's funeral using her cousin's doll<sup>24</sup>—provides clues as to how aesthetics, divorced from the religion espoused by her forebears, could offer a reprieve from hopelessness:

Bishop's lifelong struggle between affirmation and denial, ultimately between life and death, took root in Great Village. She did not inherit the Boomers' religious faith; she remained an unbeliever. In its place she developed a trust in beauty and art. She remembered the sound of [the blacksmith] Nate's hammer ringing through the Boomers' house and counteracting her mother's screams, the glitter of the solder offsetting the darkness in her Uncle Arthur's workshop, and Mary's doll adorned with flowers prolonging Gwendolyn's beauty and innocence, if only briefly. In each case something crafted and attractive relieved the gloom. (Fountain and Brazeau 12)

That which relieved the gloom began with how the self shaped its behaviour.

Bishop's esteem for traditional decorum is evident in her later work "Manners,"<sup>25</sup> originally conceived as a poem for children. Here, the poet presents her child-self at its most secure and unthreatened, being reminded by her Bulmer grandfather of familial standards of congenial behaviour. In eight quatrains of steady iambic trimeter evoking the timeless lull of the ballad, the poet lays out her grandfather's edicts for acceptable conduct, which offer not merely constraint but also a means of reorienting the lost. When

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<sup>24</sup> Bishop's childhood friend, Gwendolyn Patriquin, had died of diabetes. The event made a significant impact on the poet and was fictionally recollected in her story "Gwendolyn" (Marshall 20).

<sup>25</sup> This poem appeared in Bishop's 1965 collection *Questions of Travel* (hereinafter referred to as *QT*) and is an example of those works created in Brazil which revisited the poet's early Nova Scotia upbringing.



a boy, Willy, climbs up on Bishop's grandfather's wagon for a ride, his pet crow escapes, leading the speaker to worry ("How would he know where to go?"[16]). However, the bird, set free on a rootless path of escape, is contained by the poem; within this, the grandfather sets forth a prescription of manners as a means of assuring that the bird will be returned:

But he flew a little way at a time  
from fence post to fence post, ahead;  
and when Willy whistled he answered.  
"A fine bird," my grandfather said.

"and he's well brought up. See he answers  
nicely when he's spoken to.  
Man or beast, that's good manners.  
Be sure that you both always do." (17-24)

Nature is, for a moment, suspended—and directed—within the poem-space. However, when drawing connections between Bishop and her courting of regularity, it is essential to consider an intrinsic affinity with what was bird-like in the poet herself—a sense of fluidity and flux. This delicate balancing of the longing for/search for/individualization of safe space (familial relations, codes of conduct) and that which sought to rebel against it perseveres throughout Bishop's work. The influence of the Modernists, as well as, in a limited capacity, the French Surrealists, is palpable in the earlier poems, including those which appeared in *North and South*. Here, the approach registers as cerebral and emotionally distanced, and the mood veers toward the phantasmagorical and enigmatic. However, at the heart of the poems, there is a sense of propulsive urgency that registers

through patterns, both lexical and sonic. There is sound play and repetition. Images or thoughts are seized upon and then questioned. The being *in* the poem—and the progress of the “lost” individual in the poem-space—is of the greatest importance.

In “Chemin de Fer,”<sup>26</sup> we see this kind of “pilgrim’s progress” at work, a search for identity that culminates in the finding of an alternative shelter and a reckoning with the challenge of taking on radical love as a virtual home-space. As with “Manners,” the harnessed form is iambic trimeter shaped into quatrains. However, the balladic metre suggests not a source of predictability and principle but rather a wobbling search for regularity and acceptance. The speaker’s anxiety, as they progress through a rural landscape marked by industrial progress, is immediately palpable:

u /    u u /    u /  
Alone | on the rail | road track  
u /    u    /    u /  
I walked | with pound | ing heart  
u    /    u / /    u / (u)  
The ties | were too close | together  
u /    u / /    u /  
or may | be too far | apart. (1-4)

There is the anapaestic skip in the second foot of the first line, followed by the plodding regularity of the second line. However, it is the second foot of Lines 3 and 4 that really gives away the mounting anxiety of the mood; the bacchius (u//) occurs twice in the same place, underlining a gesture of epanorthosis—immediate self-questioning or self-

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<sup>26</sup> Originally published in *North and South* (1946; hereinafter referred to as *NS*).

correction. Are the ties “too close” or “too far” from each other? Head down, mesmerized by her progress, the speaker is unable to divine a sense of “normalcy.” Looking up from the ties, they contemplate the landscape:

u / uu / u / (u u)  
The scen | ery was | impoverished:  
/ / u / u /  
scrub pine | and oak; || | beyond  
u / u / / / (u u)  
Its ming | led grey | -green foliage  
u / u / u /  
I saw | the lit | tle pond (5-8)

The flora is baldly austere (“impoverished”), according to Bishop. However, what holds these depressing wilderness images are two lines—Line 5 and Line 7— which are paradoxically embellished with extra rhythm. Line 5 has an anapaest in the second foot plus a double extra-syllable ending, while Line 7 has a spondee in the first foot (“**scrub pine**”) and its own double extra-syllable ending. Furthermore, there is the whisper of slant rhyme that links “impoverished” and “foliage.” The ghost of a mysterious comforting alliance lingers—but where? The speaker moves on through the landscape, like a character in a fairy tale, following a trail of invisible breadcrumbs to the place

u u / u / u /  
where the dir | ty her | mit lives,  
(u) / u \ / /  
lie | like an | old tear  
(u) / u / uu / (u u)  
Hold | ing on | to its injuries

/ u   u /     u u /  
lucid | ly year | after year. (9-12)

We are pulled into the image of the hermit, partially through Bishop’s use of double-  
assonance (involving the /3:/ and /I/ sounds) in the first line (“dirty hermit lives”). “Dirty”  
immediately invests the mystery figure with the stigma of the “unholy” contaminated  
“other.” In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary  
Douglas speaks of how, in western civilization, our fear of dirt and contamination reveals  
a deep-rooted need to impose order at all costs, “to make unity of experience”(2). The  
“dirty hermit” is, like Bishop, an outsider. Bishop, the almost-orphan who struggles to  
come to terms with her passion for women in an intolerant age and culture, finds herself  
drawn onwards. The act of moving forward implies an abundance of confidence, but here  
the speaker, afflicted by a lack of confidence, presses on nonetheless. Further ambiguity is  
present in the poet’s use of modification; a lingering obscurity blurs the links between  
“the little pond” of Line 8, the hermit, the “old tear” of Line 10, and the speaker. Is it the  
pond that lies “like an old tear” or the hermit (the possibility of which leads the reader to  
consider “lies” as a rejection of truth-telling and regularity of discourse)? Is it the pond  
that holds “onto its injuries” or the hermit? Whatever it is, it continues “year after year”  
(12). However, before the reader can contemplate this further, a violent gesture rips  
through the base metre:

u     /     u     /     /     u     /     /  
The her | mit shot off | his shot-gun

u u / u u / u /  
and the tree | by the cab | in shook.  
/ u u / u u / (u)  
Over | the pond | went a ripple.  
u / / / / /  
The pet | hen went | chook-chook. (13-16)

With the gun going off, the stanza reverberates, not only with two consecutive bacchii in Line 13, two consecutive anapaests in Line 14, an initial trochee, anapaest, and extra-syllable ending in Line 15, and a chattering pair of spondees in Line 16, but also with clusters of repetition. This is a conscious choice—Bishop could have the hermit simply “shoot off his gun” or “shoot off his rifle,” but she opens fire with two “shot”s. The hen, in Line 16, erupts with the onomatopoeic “chook-chook,” adding to the staccato rhythms of the monosyllabic diction. The total effect is one of almost storybook-like levity, bringing the register into the realm of the merry and the ludic. This is until the stakes are raised:

/ u u / u u / (u)  
“Love should | be put | into action!”  
/ u / / (u)  
screamed the | old hermit.  
u / u / u / (u)  
Across | the pond | an echo.  
(u)/ u / u u / (u)  
tried | and tried | to confirm it. (17-20)

The hermit’s weirdly incongruous proclamation reads as sweepingly theatrical, a kind of one-line manifesto, given extra vigour by both the initial trochee and the final anapaest with its extra-syllable ending. However, it is the line immediately after which strikes the

ear with a chill. The act of screaming aligns with the madness of Bishop's own mother;<sup>27</sup> adding to the disruption is the fact that Bishop truncates the line to two feet and reverses the first foot, turning it into a trochee while following this with a spondee and an extra-syllable ending. The effect is one of urgency and misfitting. But the hermit's words resonate with the speaker; the last two lines re-stabilize the metre somewhat and hint at the existence of a kind of reciprocity. The "echo" that rings out across the water is mirrored in the assonance in "across and "pond," as well as the repetition of "tried" in the final line. The effect is akin to a plaintive but firm gesture of place-claiming; despite the climate of supernatural strangeness (which marks the poems of *North and South* in general), there is a sense of progression towards this alternate domestic reality—a cabin in the woods, a place for outcasts.<sup>28</sup> This progression, marked by sound play and the affirming drum of repetition, asserts the speaker's desire—indeed, her claimed right—to move towards a space where love (and, in Bishop's case, queer love) can indeed be put "into action."

Bishop's relationship with irregularity was a two-sided one. She found herself attracted to marginalized/fringe figures (a fact hinted at by the magnetism of the hermit in

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<sup>27</sup> The sound of screaming would feature prominently in Bishop's 1953 autobiographical short story "In the Village".

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note, in Bishop's work, the leitmotif of movement towards the hidden dwelling-place that seems to emerge out of nowhere. An example of how this lingers in Bishop's consciousness can be seen (albeit in a more political and critical context) in the unpublished "Brasil 1959", where the speaker describes the new "far inland" capital of Brasilia as "a fairy palace, small, impractical" that "rises upon a barren field of mud" (17, 19-20).

“Chemin de Fer”) and yet recoiled from the prospect of suffering her mother’s desperate fate. Remembering Bishop from her time in San Francisco, Hilary Bradt (who had worked with psychiatric patients as well as in the capacity of Bishop’s lover’s<sup>29</sup> nanny) states that the poet “was always talking ... about the insane people she dealt with”. Friend Robert Fizdale bluntly stated that “craziness was always in the picture somewhere [in Elizabeth’s life]. She was attracted to it as well as sort of afraid” (Fountain and Brazeau 241, 256). When Bishop, on Robert Lowell’s recommendation, took up the post of Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, from 1949 to 1950, one of her less welcome duties was to take over Lowell’s regular visits to Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital (Fountain and Brazeau, 114-115; Marshall 87).<sup>30</sup> “Visits to St. Elizabeth,”<sup>31</sup> begun in 1956 and featured in *The Partisan Review*’s Pound tribute issue from the spring of 1957, takes as its model the traditional nursery rhyme “The House that Jack Built,” which presents, through a string of incrementally longer stanzas, a domino-chain of chaotic events that culminate in the traditionally suitable domestic resolution of a marriage :

This is the farmer sowing his corn,  
That kept the cock that crow'd in the morn,

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<sup>29</sup> Roxanne Cumming, referred to by Brett C. Millier in *Life* as “Suzanne Bowen”.

<sup>30</sup> Pound had been confined to St Elizabeth’s for a breakdown, following his incarceration in Italy on charges of treason (Mitchell, 87). Bishop found Pound’s politics repugnant but continued to visit him in her capacity as Poetry Consultant, sometimes bringing along younger poets.

<sup>31</sup> *QT*.

That waked the priest all shaven and shorn,  
That married the man all tatter'd and torn,  
That kissed the maiden all forlorn,  
That milk'd the cow with the crumpled horn,  
That tossed the dog,  
That worried the cat,  
That killed the rat,  
That ate the malt  
That lay in the house that Jack built. (56-66)

Bishop's poem follows the form of the nursery rhyme to the letter. The difference here is that the emphasis is not on a chain of events that leads to domestic unity and thematic resolution but rather on the poet's shifting impressions of the man who "lies in the house of Bedlam" and those who surround him. The accentual drive of the original, flavoured with a triple-metre skip, presents this house—and the flawed poet who lies at its heart—as the site of a tornado of disorder in which everything lies together but does not come together—in effect, the antithesis of a desirable domestic environment:<sup>32</sup>

/ u u / u u / u u /  
These are the years and the walls and the door  
u / u u / u / u /  
that shut on a boy that pats the floor  
u / u u / u / u /  
to feel if the world is there and flat.  
/ u u / u u / u u /  
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat  
u / u / u u / u /  
that dances joyfully down the ward  
/ u u / u / u /  
into the parting seas of board

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<sup>32</sup> As this poem seems to exhibit more of an accentual metrical structure (albeit one coloured by the momentum of the triple foot), I have left out foot-breaks.



u u / u /u  
past the staring sailor  
u / u /  
that shakes his watch  
u / u /  
that tells the time  
u u /u u /  
of the poet, || the man  
u / u u / u /u  
that lies in the house of Bedlam. (56-66)

The mention of the watch here is no accident. Bishop, as pointed out by Brett C. Millier, demonstrates, in both her poetry and her correspondence, a feverish obsession with time.<sup>33</sup> The “staring sailor,” adrift in a maelstrom of disorder, “shakes his watch,” which is connected, through the unrolling of enjambment, to the very state in which “the poet, the man” finds himself. The non-functioning of clocks symbolizes not only madness but also a state of being out of step with the universe and the powers that govern it. One of Bishop’s greatest inspirations was the English metaphysical poet George Herbert. In his work, Herbert dwells on questions of truth, belonging, and deserving, harnessing the mechanics of form and the innovative use of images as a means of engineering the process of the search for truth and salvation. In “Even-Song,” the poet represents night not as a jumping-off point for the Id and the untrammelled chance to dream (and hence escape the trials of the world) but as a kind of death in miniature, a space in which God has the potential to return humanity to regularity and rectitude:

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<sup>33</sup> Millier extensively explores the relationship between Bishop and time in *Flawed Light: American Women Poets and Alcohol* and her biography of the poet, *Life and the Memory of It*.

Thus in thy Ebony box  
Thou dost enclose us, till the day  
Put our amendment in our way,  
And give new wheels to our disordered clocks. (21-24)

God, in Herbert's view, aligns with the archetype of the Great Architect, shaping, calibrating, and restoring order. The fact that Bishop herself showed ambivalence about the existence of a God had no bearing on her undimmed admiration for Herbert or his work; in looking at her poems, it becomes evident that the desire to shape poetic space and rhythm owed much to Herbert in terms of honouring the sense that adhering to time (and, by extension, avoiding being "out of time") brought with it the promise, if not the absolute assurance, of shelter and potential redemption. In an unpublished draft, "Where are the dolls who loved me so...", Bishop both contemplates and longs for the inanimate companions of her youth, dwelling on:

... their real eyes  
Blank crotches,  
and/play/ wrist-watches,  
Whose hands moved only when they wanted—

Their stoicism I never mastered  
their smiling phrase for every occasion—  
They went their rigid little ways

To meditate in trunks or closets  
To let [life and] unforeseen emotions  
glance off their glazed complexions. (7-16)

The symbol of the doll becomes a site where unquestioning care coincides with sexual “normalcy” (“blank crotches”), emotional self-control, and social facility. The poem's heart might be perceived in the image of the “play / wrist-watches,” which allow their owners to manipulate time, effectively making them, if we are to view them according to Herbert's cosmology, gods in miniature.

Another earlier poem, “A Miracle for Breakfast,”<sup>34</sup> combines the vertiginous mix of shifting variables seen in “Visit to St. Elizabeth's” with further allusions to time. The poem, in this case, sets up a scenario in which the speaker awaits, against the backdrop of a set of theatrically-positioned transformations, an elevation to some kind of domestic comfort. Written in 1936, during the privations of the Great Depression (and following a return from Europe, where Bishop had been enjoying the hand-me-down privileges of wealth via her then-lover, the heiress Louise Crane), “A Miracle for Breakfast” harnesses the circularity of the sestina with its rotating suite of end-words, to show the tantalizing dance between desire and frustration (Marshall 60). The poem seizes the reader's attention from the very start by grounding the action in a specific moment in time and in a set of expectations:

u / u / u u / u u / (u)  
At six | o'clock | we were wait | ing for coffee,  
/ u u / u u u / uuu /  
waiting | for cof | fee and the char | itable crumb

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<sup>34</sup> *NS*.

u u / u u u / u u / u /(uu)  
 that was go | ing to be served | from a cer | tain balcony  
 u / u / u / u /(u u)  
 --like kings | of old, || or like | a miracle.  
 u u / / / u u /  
 It was | still dark. || One foot | of the sun  
 / u u / u u / / u u u /(u)  
 steadied | itself on a | long rip | ple in the river. (1-6)

With a fixed time (“At six o’clock”) and two consecutive iambs, the poem begins, setting up a mood of anticipation. As in a Depression-era bread line, the speaker awaits some kind of handout, but here there is an elusiveness at play; the first line stretches out with two anapaests and then into the realm of unreality with a series of startling variations, the most unusual perhaps being the fourth paeon (uuu/). This foot, which finds itself more at home in classical prose than in 20th-century poetry, adds a “drum roll” effect to the spectacle of waiting, especially when contrasted with the rooting effect conveyed by the poet’s use of a double iamb (“It was **still dark**”)<sup>35</sup> and a pair of spondees (“**One foot**”; “**long rip-**”). The “hurry up and wait” effect continues into the second stanza:

u / / u u u / u / / u /(u)  
 The first fer | ry of the day | had just crossed | the river.  
 u u / / u / u u /(u)  
 It was | so cold | we hoped | that the coffee  
 u / u u / / u u u /  
 would be | very hot, || seeing | that the sun  
 u / u u u / u u / u /  
 was not | going to warm | us; || and that | the crumb

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<sup>35</sup> A double iamb (or choriamb) is defined, not as two successive iambs, but as a pyrrhic followed by a spondee (Finch, *A Poet’s Craft* 311).

u / u / / / u u u /(uu)  
 would be | a loaf each, || | buttered, | by a miracle.  
 u / u u / / / u u /(uu)  
 At sev | en a man | stepped out | on the balcony. (7-12)

The balancing act between rootedness and flux continues as if to mirror the tensions between the speaker positioned outside in the cold and the elusive promised comforts of domestic space—coffee, warmth, and “the crumb” that might become “a loaf . . . , buttered by a miracle”. The urgency is ramped up by the insertion of a bacchius in Line 7 (“The **first fer-**”; “had **just crossed**”) and in Line 11 (“a **loaf each**”), as well as more substitutions of the fourth paeon (“-ry of the **day**”; “going to **warm**”) In Lines 7 and 10. The last line of the stanza brings everything to a dramatic pause: we have another indication of time (“at seven”) coinciding with the appearance of “a man”—a potential benefactor. Our attention is again drawn to the subject at hand by a spondee (“**stepped out**”); the assonant and consonant sound echo that links “stepped” and “seven” delicately indicates the importance of this moment. The drama continues into the following stanza:

u / u u / u u / u u /(uu)  
 He stood | for a min | ute alone | on the balcony  
 u u / u u / u / u /(u)  
 looking o | ver our heads | toward | the river.  
 u / u / u u u / u u u /(uu)  
 A ser | vant hand | ed him the mak | ings of a miracle,  
 u / u u / / / u / (u)  
 consist | ing of one | lone cup | of coffee  
 u / / / u u / u u /  
 and one | roll, || which | he proceed | ed to crumb,  
 u / u u / u u / u / u u /  
 his head, | so to speak, || | in the clouds– || along | with the sun. (13-18)

The mysterious man on the balcony stands in aloof disregard of the speaker and the supplicants they represent; Lines 13 and 14 carry on in a fairly uniform stream of iambs and anapaests. However, the narrative events ascend to the level of ritual in Line 15, as the servant offers the man what is essentially a kind of sacrament. This line stretches out with two more fourth paeons, followed by an extra-syllable “tail,” necessitated by the end word “miracle.” Again, in the two lines which follow (16-17), the pointed double tap of the spondee draws our attention to the cup of coffee (“**lone cup**”) and the bread (“**roll which**”) hovering at the centre of a removed and heightened domestic event which seems to have assumed almost Eucharistic importance. But what is the man *doing* with the bread? Rather than position himself as a benefactor, the man tears it up. The return, in Line 18, to the easy swing of the iamb and the anapaest seems to estrange the speaker and us from the man and his intentions. As if to drive this home, Bishop draws him away from us with the addition of an additional foot:

u / u u / u u / u / **u u /**  
his head, | so to speak, || | in the clouds— | along | **with the sun.**  
(18)

As can be expected, the speaker finds themselves in a quandary. What exactly is going on here? The fourth stanza speculates on this and reveals the paltry effort of the potential benefactor:

u u / / u / / u u /  
 Was the | man cra | zy? || What und | er the sun  
 u u / u u / / / u u /(uu)  
 was he try | ing to do, || | up there | on his balcony!  
 / / u / u / u / /  
 Each man | received | one rath | er hard crumb,  
 u / / / uu / u u /(u)  
 which some | flicked scorn | fully in | to the river,  
 \ u u / / / u u /(u)  
 and, in | a cup, || | one drop | of the coffee.  
 / u u u u / / u u u /(uu)  
 Some of | us stood around, || | waiting | for the miracle. (19-24)

Having been faced with this rejection of domestic benevolence, the speaker reacts with an attitude that hovers between bemusement and mock outrage. The number of spondaic substitutions is no less than six (a similar sonic impression is conveyed by the bacchius at the end of Line 21), leading the reader to imagine, if one is to think fancifully, of the speaker stamping their foot in incredulity. However, there still exists the possibility of transformation and deliverance to domestic entitlement. Line 24, with its initial and medial trochees and revisitation of the fourth paeon in the second foot, stirs with suspense. The deliverance (if we can call it that) which occurs in the fifth stanza provides a sharp and generous contrast to the bewildering disappointment found in the third:

u u / u u / / u u / u /(uu)  
 I can tell | what I | saw next; || | it was not | a miracle.  
 u / uu / u / u u /  
 A beaut | iful vil | la stood | in the sun  
 u / u / u u / u / / (u)  
 and from | its doors | came the smell | of hot coffee.  
 u / u u / / / u / (u u)  
 In front, | a baroque | white plas | ter balcony

/ u u /            u /   u u u /(u)  
added | by birds, || | who nest | along the river,  
u /   u u   /   /   /   u u   /  
--I saw | it with one | eye close | to the crumb-- (25-30)

The speaker has a tale to tell of a dream realized. She sets this up with a double iamb (“what I **saw next**”), followed by a dramatic caesura, before proclaiming that what was to appear next was “not a miracle.” In effect, the speaker is introducing a different kind of miracle: one generated by the speaker’s imagination and desire rather than emanating from a patriarchal benefactor. Line 26 rolls out in a mellifluous string of alternating iambs and anapaests to lyrically show the “beautiful villa” that stands outside of time and patriarchal authority. From there, the metre continues to drift dreamily as it describes the vision, stiffening only into the bacchius (with an extra-syllable ending) in Line 27 (“of **hot coffee**”) and into the spondaic substitutions in Lines 25, 28, and 30. Another fourth paeon (with an extra syllable ending) ruffles the end of Line 29 as if to allude to the birds—both their freedom and the surrealism (that ruffling of logic) inherent in the idea of their having added “the baroque white plaster balcony.” As high-flown as this imaginarium might seem, Bishop’s focus and intent transmit as deadly serious—lines featuring “I saw” (including mirroring emphatic spondees in the form of “**saw next**” and “**eye close**”) sandwich the rest of the stanza, repurposing it as a statement of testimony and ownership. In the sixth stanza, the “parallel home” embodied by that of the poem-space blooms with potential—a potential that is personal:



u / u u u / u / u / /  
 and gal | leries and mar | ble cham | bers. || My crumb  
 u / u / u / u u /(uu)  
 my man | sion, || made | for me | by a miracle,  
 u / u u / u / u u /(u)  
 through ag | es, || by in | sects, birds, || and the river  
 / u u / u u / u u /  
 working | the stone. || Every day, || in the sun,  
 u / u / u / u u /(uu)  
 at break | fast time | I sit | on my balcony  
 u u / / u u / u u /(u)  
 with my | feet up, || and drink gal | lons of coffee. (31-36)

Lines 31 and 32 seem to hum happily with a suite of /m/ sounds; there is the characteristic fourth paeon in Line 31, lending a breathless sense of release as the speaker takes ownership of this domestic bounty (“**My** crumb / **my** mansion, made for **me** by a miracle”). The hope for this domestic happiness is that it is certain, regular, dependable, the product of a kind of earned destiny. The miracle has been in the works “through ages”; its contours have been fashioned by nature itself —“by insects, birds, and the river / working the stone.” The speaker, in a flight of iambs and anapaests, declares, with another marker of time (“Every day in the sun”), her assumed right to partake of domestic leisure outside of the dictates of financial hardship and societal exclusion. Line 36’s cheerfully belligerent double iamb (“with my **feet up**”) and insouciant anapaest-driven hyperbole (“and drink **gallons of coffee**”) suspend the speaker in a state of dream domestic bliss until the envoi brings reality crashing in:

u / u u / u / u u /(u)  
 We licked | up the crumb | and swal | lowed the coffee.

u / u u / u / u / u /  
A win | dow across | the ri | ver caught | the sun  
u / u / uu u / u / u / /(u u)  
as if | the mir | acle were work | ing, || on | the wrong balcony. (37-39)

The envoi, a traditional feature of the sestina, is a micro-engine of compression. It embodies all of the end words that have tumbled throughout the previous stanzas. But, rather than operating as a site of inclusion and satisfying resolution, this envoi provides a curt coda to the proceedings. In a line alternating iambs and anapaests, the crumb is consumed, and the coffee is swallowed. The second line of the envoi offers promise: an almost-regular iambic line (varied only by an anapaest in the second foot) shows the beneficent sun, even as it hovers “across the river.” But it is the last line that transmits to us the irregularity of the speaker’s desires. After two subsequent iambs, the stage machinery of the fourth paeon starts up again for the last time, as if in an attempt to reanimate the “miracle,” the entry into some kind of domestic security and abundance. But what follows the fourth paeon is one crisply rational iamb followed by the lumbering awkwardness of a final bacchius and extra double syllable ending (“the **wrong balcony**”). The speaker has found herself out of place and time; even as the sestina, with its repeating endings, allows possibilities to cycle around, recombine and generate new possibilities, satisfaction, security—and domestic regularity—lie just out of reach.

“Somebody loves us all”: Form and Intimacy

Bishop’s need for regularity informed how she sought to enter into home-finding and home-making and, by extension, how she determined where and how she was comfortable, both in the world and the poem-space. However, her defensive measures against anxiety concerning the home included incorporating a mandate of intimacy into her formal poetic practice. In line with her need for regularity and the drive to assimilate the “masculinist” logic of models like Herbert and Wordsworth, Bishop showed her links to Modernism by assiduously avoiding, whenever she could, what she perceived to be the “feminine” excesses of the sentimental and the confessional. This is not to say that Bishop avoided portrayals of human domestic and erotic intimacies altogether. However, the climate of intolerance in the mid-20th century (particularly after the Second World War) that swirled around queerness made strategically oblique approaches necessary. In “Sleeping on the Ceiling” (written while Bishop was in Paris with Crane),<sup>36</sup> the poet slyly and wistfully plays with the late-19th/early-20th-century sexological concept of “inversion” (used to describe queer love). The speaker lies in bed with her lover, in a bed not her own, in a room not her own, in a city not her own. However, this does not stop her from reaching out, through the filter of the liminal psychic space between sleeping and waking, to contemplate a painted image on the room’s ceiling, an alternate dimension of domestic space (McCabe 56). The poem begins on a note of chaste anticipation:

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<sup>36</sup> *NS*.

u / u / u / u / (u)  
 It is | so peace | ful on | the ceiling!  
 u / u / u / u /  
 It is | the Place | de la | Concorde.  
 u / u / u / u /  
 The lit | tle crys | tal chand | elier  
 u / u / u u / u /  
 is off, || the foun | tain is in | the dark.  
 (u) / u / u / u /  
 Not | a soul | is in | the park. (1-5)

The constant repetition of the word “is” sets up the notion that things are in place. Those apparati of the watchful daylight world—the fountain, the chandelier—have been relocated to the domain of the ceiling; here, they exist in a state of unpeopled tranquility. The lines in this stanza are primly suspended within the iambic tetrameter template. The variations that occur are subtle: a final unstressed syllable in Line 1 (“**ceiling**”), the delicate hiccup of an anapaest in Line 4 (“-tain is **in**”), the omitted initial unstressed syllable in Line 5. The last two lines chime together in perfect end rhymes.

In the second stanza, the depopulation of the “inverted” world of the ceiling allows something irregular, fierce, and non-human to emerge. That which is degraded, “peeling,” acts as a portal for alternate vital forces to be observed:<sup>37</sup>

u / u u / / u u / (u)  
 Below, || where the | wall pap | er is peeling,  
 u / u u / u / u /  
 the Jar | din des Plantes | has locked | its gates.

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<sup>37</sup> It would be highly likely that Bishop had read, and was thinking of, the eponymous wall-coverings in Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

u / u / u / u /  
Those pho | tographs | are an | imals.  
u / u / u u / u u /(u)  
The migh | ty flow | ers and fol | iage rustle;  
/ u u / u / u / (u)  
under | the leaves | the in | sects tunnel. (6-10)

Line 6, with its double iamb in the second and third foot (“where the **wall pap-**”), directs the reader/listener’s attention to what lies beneath the ceiling image of urbane civility. There is the heart-skip of an anapaest with an extra-syllable ending in the last foot of this line and another orthodox anapaest in the second foot of Line 7. After Line 8, which moves along in straightforward iambic metre (“Those **photographs** are **animals**”), comes Line 9, which bristles with two anapaests in the third and fourth feet. Something hidden is emerging; the anticipation is ramped up by the brisk jolt of an initial trochee (“**under**”) in Line 10, alerting us to the existence and movement of an insect population. As with the preceding stanza, there is a rhyming couplet at the conclusion; however, this pair is united by half rather than full rhymes. “[R]ustle” and “tunnel” are not traditionally “full” enough to traditionally round off a rhymed couplet; however, they feel almost conspiratorially linked in their task of conveying subversive activity. It is therefore daring but satisfying to imagine the metaphoric link between the form and the imagined mindset of the speaker. Like one of the components of the aforementioned half-rhymed couplet, she is half of a “non-traditional” pair. She, therefore, exhorts her beloved, in the final stanza, to leap with her into the world of “inverted” space and engage in mock combat:

u / u / u u / \ (u)  
We must | go un | der the | wallpaper  
u / u / u / u / (u)  
to meet | the in | sect-glad | iator,  
u / u / u / u / (u)  
to bat | tle with | the net | and trident,  
u / u / u / u /  
and leave | the fount | ain and | the square.  
u / u / u / / /  
But oh, || | that we | could sleep | up there... (11-15)

In Line 11, we feel the theatrical thrust of a double iamb in the last two feet, suggesting that the speaker is playfully raising her fist and leading the charge against the invisible insect foe. The next three lines spill out the fancifulness of this scenario in regular iambs (varied only by extra syllable endings in Lines 12 and 13); the speaker and her beloved will choose their comically daring exploits over “the fountain and the square,” joint symbols of a watchful (and judgemental) extra-domestic world. However, in Line 15, a sudden note of gravitas and yearning is sounded. “But oh” is set off by one of the three caesurae in the entire poem, a breath pause with all the significance of an uncrossable chasm. What follows is a plaintive unfulfillable wish: to be able to engage in the most elemental acts of love within the domestic space, an act that seems only possible in a world that is inversion embodied. The upside-down domain of the ceiling, where insect-creatures tunnel, bustle about, and fight, a place signalled by the spondaic finger point of

“up there,” is still the safest place for the speaker to sleep with her beloved, undisturbed and unjudged.<sup>38</sup>

Bishop’s descriptions of the intimacies of queer love were always cautious; however, her narrative/ thematic trajectories around this subject were less elliptically drawn after her move to Brazil and her entering into a romantic partnership with Lota. In “The Shampoo,”<sup>39</sup> the speaker broaches the description of an intimate domestic scenario (the washing of her lover’s hair) by—as in “Sleeping on the Ceiling”—imagining the actions and cycles of forces in a removed environment. Comprising three six-line stanzas made up of lines of varying length, the poem moves from outside space to inside space, questioning and then asserting ownership over interior intimate domestic practices. In the first stanza, using steady and considered unvaried iambic metre, Bishop shows the progress—a moving together—of two disparate natural elements that manage to defeat time and logic as they unite:

u / u / u / u /  
The still | explos | ions on | the rocks,

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<sup>38</sup> The poem’s themes (inversion, irregularity) would find themselves articulated more explicitly in “Insomnia”, in which the poet invites the beloved

into that world inverted  
where left is always right,  
where the shadows are really the body,  
where we stay awake all night,  
where the heavens are shallow as the sea  
is now deep, and you love me. (13-18)

<sup>39</sup>A *Cold Spring* (155; hereinafter referred to as *ACS*).

u / u /  
the lich | ens grow  
u / u / u / u /  
by spread | ing, gray, || | concen | tric shocks.  
u / u /  
They have | arranged  
u / u / u / u / u /  
To meet | the rings | around | the moon, || | although  
u / u / u \ u / u /  
within | our mem | ories | they have | not changed. (1-6)

The convergence of these “shocks” and “rings” (words that subliminally, by association, suggest both erotic charge and domestic union) seems to work against the laws of regular time; in the eyes of the speaker and their beloved, the “still explosions” of the lichens remain unmoved although, as in the suspended vignette in “Sleeping on the Ceiling,” they harbour a conspiratorial and busy otherness that seems to encourage the speaker to unite with the beloved. Indeed, the lovers remain encouraged by this proposed shadow side to time. In the second stanza, the speaker draws a connection between this natural assertion of kinships and their own entitlement to happiness.:

u / u / u / u /  
And since | the heav | ens will | attend  
u / u /  
as long | on us  
u / / /  
you’ve been, || | dear friend,  
u / u u \ u / u\  
precip | itate and | pragma | tical;  
u / u / u u / \  
and look | what happ | ens. || For | Time is  
/ u u / u / u\  
nothing | if not | amen | able. (7-12)



Lines 7 and 8 continue with iambic regularity. However, in Line 9, a theatrically poised caesura sets off the spondaic direct address (“**dear friend**”), signalling a movement into claimed intimacy with one who, “precipitate and pragmatical,” has sensibly upended the rules of natural time. This fourth line of the stanza (10), with its alliterative link and anapaestic substitution in the second foot, claims the pleasures of the now. Lines 11 and 12 gesture towards this magical shift: a pyrrhic and half-spondee (i.e. a double iamb), coupled with a feminine caesura,<sup>40</sup> set off the beneficence of Time, which is described as being “nothing if not amenable.” The final stanza of the poem implies even greater intimacy—between cosmic realms and between people:

u / u / u u / /  
 The shoot | ing stars | in your | black hair  
 u / u / (u)  
 in bright | formation  
 u / u /  
 are flock | ing where,  
 / / / /  
 so straight, || | so soon?  
 / u u / u \ u / / / (u)  
 —Come, || let | me wash | it in | this big | tin basin,  
 / u u / u / u /  
 battered | and shi | ny like | the moon. (13-18)

The stars have fallen from the sky into the hair of the speaker’s beloved. Unlike the “gray concentric shocks” of the lichen and the “rings around the moon” in the first stanza, these

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<sup>40</sup> Finch identifies a feminine caesura as one which occurs within the metrical foot. A masculine caesura, on the other hand, is one which occurs in conjunction with the foot break (*A Poet’s Craft* 338).

stars are described in terms of the linear, “flocking ... / so straight, so soon”. They register in the metre, in Lines 13 and 16, as spondees, lending a startled note to the proceedings. In spite of the harmonious romantic paradigm modelled by the lichen and the moon rings, the fact of the matter is that time is passing “so straight, so soon.” Age and death, as well as the whims of an intolerant world, stand in the way of queer intimacies. Bishop’s homespun solution—signalled by an initial trochee (which is, in turn, punctuated by a strong feminine caesura)—is to unite heaven and earth another way. The introduction of a “big tin basin” rattles with a final spondee and resonates with an assonant hum; the last line presents it as (via a jarring initial trochee) as worn, “**battered**,” but it is “like the moon”—a symbol of the cyclical, a way of reshaping the link between the mortal lovers and immortal heavenly forces and snatching personal intimacy from the jaws of both society and linear time.

Bishop’s need for intimacy was partially rooted in her childhood lack of a steady nuclear family unit. The loss of Bishop’s mother, Gertrude, had particular ramifications regarding the poet’s perspective and process; it created within Bishop’s psyche a perennial sense of abandonment (and a subsequent search for quasi-maternal surrogates in the form of lovers, editors, and associates). In her 2017 biography of Bishop, Megan Marshall paints a haunting portrait of the burgeoning maternal estrangement that was to mark Bishop for her whole life:

Few memories of [Bishop’s] mother were beautiful, or simply sad. Her mother hit her sometimes. Worse was the way Gertrude left her for weeks or

months—repeatedly—or seemed to be absent even when she was there. At three years old, Elizabeth was visiting Bishop relatives with her mother at the shore in Marblehead, Massachusetts, when a fire broke out across the harbor in Salem. It was a hot, dry day and Elizabeth woke in her crib, stood to watch the red sky outside the window ... Outside on the lawn below, her mother also watched, her white summer dress turning “rose red”, Elizabeth forgotten. People arrived in boats, escaping the blaze. Her mother joined neighbours, offering “coffee or food,” and Elizabeth called out to her through the open window “and called and called.” Day turned to night, flames engulfed the city across the water, and “I was terribly thirsty but Mama didn’t hear me calling.” (Marshall 10-11)

The same year as the fire, Gertrude suffered her first episode of mental distress. Her behaviour went from uncontrollable to violent, at which point she was committed, in 1916, by the Bulmers to the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth. The five-year-old Elizabeth was assiduously sheltered from her mother; it might be said that, as she grew, she was sheltered from the *idea* of her mother. By the time she was an adolescent, Bishop had, in the words of her friend Dorothee Bowie, “out of a kind of self-defence, just pushed it away. She simply wiped it out” (Fountain and Brazeau 5).

Bishop’s feelings of abandonment and subsequent exile became a crucible of trauma and longing; she sought comfort in whatever transient home-spaces she could find. Accounts describe how, in 1929, as a teenage pupil on summer holidays from Walnut Hill School in Natick, Massachusetts, Bishop ran away from the home of her Aunt Florence and hitchhiked her way back to campus; she was discovered by police, sleeping on the front steps (Fountain and Brazeau 32). May 1934, Bishop’s final year at Vassar College, saw the death of her mother. As much as she had “wiped...out” the concept of an

existent mother, Bishop realized that her solitude in the world was, as she stood on the threshold of adulthood, absolute (Fountain and Brazeau (58-59)).<sup>41</sup> However, this is not to say that the poet particularly longed for, or fetishized, a lost domestic idyll. Although she remembered and regarded Nova Scotia with great affection, the home spaces of her childhood proved more problematic. The orthodox heteronormative middle-class domestic milieu, in Bishop's experience, vibrates with insecurity and unrest. In "First Death in Nova Scotia,"<sup>42</sup> the speaker details how her child-self witnesses and participates in the death rituals around the passing of a little cousin, "Arthur,"<sup>43</sup> laid out "[i]n the cold, cold parlour" (1) under silent chromograph images of royalty and accompanied in his eerie, aestheticized stillness by a stuffed loon located on the "white, frozen lake" (15) of a table. Nestled in his coffin ("a little frosted cake" [28]), Arthur is reduced to a doll-like symbol of both loss and the stiff Edwardian formality that hovers around domestic roles and rituals. In "Sestina" (also from 1965),<sup>44</sup> a child and her grandmother take part in necessary homey practices (drawing, making tea, reading jokes, tidying up) while an overhanging sense of loss and despair predominates. Despite the performing of love and care, the universe of the grandmother's home is assaulted on all sides by the presence of

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<sup>41</sup> More will be said later about Bishop's sense of personal exile and how it dovetailed with a search for privacy (and how this finds itself suggested by the formal structures of her work).

<sup>42</sup> *QT*.

<sup>43</sup> "Arthur" was inspired by Bishop's cousin Frank, who died aged two months, when the poet was four years old (Ellis).

<sup>44</sup> *QT*.

“tears.” They infiltrate the rain, the steam of the kettle, the tea, the buttons of the man in the child’s drawing. As in “First Death in Nova Scotia,” here, too, the home “feels chilly” (24); although the kitchen setting registers as more kinetic and loving than the parlour of the previous poem, this is still “another inscrutable house” (39), marked by repression, rejection, and unspoken grief.

It is, therefore, curiously logical that Bishop’s search for maternal intimacy finds its fullest realization in male-dominated environments. In her essay “Elizabeth Bishop: The Reclamation of Female Space,” Vicki Feaver examines how Bishop transforms such spaces into virtual wombscapes, sites of generative female energy. In one of the most famous examples, her free-verse poem “The Fish,”<sup>45</sup> the poet describes the Hemmingway-esque exploit of catching a large fish in a “little rented boat” (67), only to transform herself from American alpha conquerer in the first line (“I caught a tremendous fish”) into a pseudo-mother, a giver of life (“And I let the fish go”) in the last (Feaver 89-93). In the more formally organized “The Moose,”<sup>46</sup> a night bus from Great Village, Nova Scotia to Boston is interrupted by the arrival of a cow-moose who emerges from “the impenetrable wood” (134) to look over and sniff the halted bus, evoking in the passengers a “sweet / sensation of joy” (155-156) and yet leaving in her wake “a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline” (166-168; Feaver 96-101). Feaver implies

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<sup>45</sup> *NS*.

<sup>46</sup> “The Moose” is made up of six stanzas of two-stress accentual lines. It was originally published in *Geography III* (1976; hereinafter referred to as *GIII*).

that the creature appears as a kind of ur-mother, a grounding figure that amazes and silences a bus full of townspeople, awash in their own detritus of domestic upheaval and disappointment.

Another moving example which embodies hidden intimacies is “Filling Station,”<sup>47</sup> a poem which unfolds not in a home but in a place of public commerce that is ostensibly the domain of men (a “Father” assisted by “several quick and saucy / and greasy sons” [7, 10-11]) Unlike the world of Charlotte Anna Perkins Gilman’s poem “The Housewife,”<sup>48</sup> which functions as an indefatigable engine of (re)production that enslaves women, that of “Filling Station” is marked by a quiet, whimsical observation that reveals the touch of the domestic in increments. The poem is technically a free-verse work, yet a close listen reveals roughly three accents per line. There is male industry (made vivid through the repetition of words like “dirty” and “oil-soaked”), there is commerce, and yet there is a phantom element overseeing the proceedings, adding beauty and, by extension, showing love. This love is expressed through order, both in terms of the filling station itself (it has been made “homier” through the addition of a set of wickerwork furniture, plants and comic books) and in the way it is revealed to us. Using the lulling swing of anaphora and a hint of end rhyme, Bishop invites us to reflect on the question of what has elevated this place from a site of commercial transaction to one of devotion made manifest through domestic ritual:

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<sup>47</sup> *QT*.

<sup>48</sup> I discuss this poem in the introduction of this dissertation.

/ u u / u u /  
Why the extraneous plant?  
/ u / u /  
Why the taboret?  
/ u / u /u  
Why, || oh why, || the doily?  
u / u u /u /  
(Embroidered in daisy stitch  
u / u / u /  
With marguerites, || I think,  
u /u u / u /  
And heavy with gray crochet.) (28-33)

By now, we are sure who the agent is here. Bishop reminds us that

/ u u u / u u /u  
Somebody embroidered the doily.  
/ u u / u u /  
Somebody waters the plant,  
u / u / u / u u  
Or oils it, || maybe. || Somebody  
u /u u / u /  
Arranges the rows of cans  
/ u u /u /  
So that they softly say:  
/ u / / /  
ESSO || —SO || —SO || —SO  
u / / / u u u  
To high-strung automobiles.  
/ u u / u /  
Somebody loves us all. (34-41)

If we consider the background context of Bishop's rootless childhood, "Filling Station" takes on a new and acute poignancy, summoning from clues, almost from the air itself, the presence of a solicitous mother-like figure, whose organizing hand touches even the

exiled and disenfranchised. Furthermore, as with Anne Bradstreet's "Verses Upon the Burning of Our House, July 10, 1666", Bishop is demonstrating her own agency as a shaper of the domestic through the manipulation of form in the poem-space. The anaphora, the hints of rhyme, the reassuring triple accents are, like the taboret, the doily, the begonia and the calming arrangement of oil cans, assertions of control and belonging and perhaps even expressions of love.

The intimacy inherent in "The Moose" and "The Fish" is not located merely in the appearance of the eponymous creatures in each case but also, as Feaver notes, in the poet's attitude toward observation: she looks, she examines, she probes, she describes, and (even more importantly) she invites us to do the same alongside her. Even in the "cold, cold parlour" (1) where little Arthur lies in his cake-like coffin in "First Death in Nova Scotia," there is the unpacking of the moment, the moving between the chromographs, the stuffed loon, and the dead child. These images culminate (like in "A Miracle for Breakfast") in a thwarted fantasy deliverance, one in which the speaker imagines the dead cousin summoned to be "the smallest page at court" (46) by the silent royals "warm and red in ermine" (42), only to see him forever trapped in the Nova Scotia house by the roads "deep in snow" (50) and the irreversibility of death. This is a grim conclusion, but one that the reader has partaken of. Observation, description, and memory are, in Bishop's world, a tripartite way of making the uncertain world anew, making a home in it, and building kinships. Scots poet and South Americanist Alastair Smith recalls how, in 1964, he and Bishop visited the botanical gardens in Rio and how this seemingly



insignificant afternoon revealed to the younger poet the galvanizing power of shared observation:

The exchange we had was a very vivid one. Elizabeth and I sat side by side and talked about what we were looking at. We would look at plants together and notice together. In other words, we were not so much communicating face to face, as we were both looking at the same thing and talking about what we were seeing . . . It was then that I got from Elizabeth that essential image of rethinking relationship. If you are sitting side by side and looking at the same thing, you relate through what you are seeing. That becomes the objective correlative. (Fountain and Brazeau 182)

In this instance, the act of being with someone and enjoying a moment of intimacy comes down to what is shared and absorbed rather than to the transmission of messages. In Bishop, this dynamic can be seen as a means of building intimacy with the reader; coupled with the use of form, this provides not only pleasure for the reader but also a near-therapeutic sense of reassurance for the poet who eschews the excesses of the confessional. Bishop herself knew that the stakes of observation were high, especially when she herself had to contest with rootlessness and the resulting sense of self-doubt and alienation. Writing to Robert Lowell from Rio on August 27, 1964, the poet made her position clear: “My passion for accuracy may strike you as old-maidish—but since we do float on an unknown sea I think we should examine the other floating things that come our way very carefully; who knows what might depend on it?” (*Words in Air* 553). That which floated past Bishop and found itself noted, remembered, examined, made real, was of the utmost importance in joining Bishop to those around her and to her readership;

however, its effectiveness paradoxically relied on the poet's own sense of exile and apartness, a state which she both dreaded and yet required in order to make the poems work.

“We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship”: Form and Privacy

The intimacy that Bishop sought and intermittently achieved and benefitted from during her lifetime was both removed and yet made richer by periods of solitude, or what this dissertation will refer to as “privacy.” In discussing form and privacy in Bishop’s work, I intend to examine two aspects of the poet’s sense of apartness. On the one hand, I wish to look at Bishop’s personal sense of separated self—being relegated, through familial and social circumstances (as well as through her depression and alcoholism), to the role of external observer. This apartness has both a positive and a negative dimension. It implies that the poet has been cast adrift from the mainstream; however, it also imbues her with the heightened ability to observe and articulate while maintaining a special authority. On the other hand, I would like to touch on Bishop’s search for domestic privacy; this manifests itself not only in her unwillingness to topically engage in the confessional imperative (as was favoured by, for example, Lowell and Sexton) but also in the way in which she coupled form with an elliptical approach.

Bishop’s sense of misfitting, her sense of being removed from love and security, dogged the poet throughout her life; as an almost-orphan shuttled between a suite of (often reluctant) relations, she felt that the attention of adults—indeed, the very presence

of adults—was fragmented, leaving her cast adrift as an “other,” even as she acknowledged herself a part of humanity. The most explicit exploration of this personal collision with otherness may arguably be found in her semi-biographical free-verse poem “In the Waiting Room” (1971),<sup>49</sup> which details the poet’s child-self outside of a domestic environment where adults—suspended in the act of “waiting”—are reduced to their discrete parts, “shadowy gray knees, / trousers and skirts and boots / and different pairs of hands” (68-70). In this vaguely menacing location, the speaker recalls herself further tormented, not only by this collection of nameless appendages but also by the contemplation (via *National Geographic* magazine) of “othered” exoticized communities, whose practices include cannibalism (“A dead man slung on a pole /—‘Long Pig,’ the caption said” [24-25]) and whose presentation of female sexuality—women with “awful hanging breasts” (81) and ‘necks / wound round and round with wire” (28-29)—evokes confusion and revulsion in the child-speaker. The threat here is a two-pronged one. On the one hand, there is the fear of being cast off into “cold, blue-black space” (59), away from the clocklike regularity of “the round turning world” (58); Bishop’s repeating of the date (“February, 2018” [53, 99]), as well as her own self-rooting in the scheme of time (“I said to myself: three days / and you’ll be seven years old” [54-55]), shows the child-speaker attempting to overcome a wild sense of existential disconnect (Ellis 80). On the other hand, there is the realization, on the part of the child-speaker (crystallized in the “cry of pain” [88] that unites her and her “foolish aunt” [49]) that she is “an *I* . . . one of *them*”

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<sup>49</sup> *GIII*

(62), united with humanity through society and biology. How is one to reconcile the extreme alienation of apartness with the claustrophobic obligations (embodied here by the “big, black wave”) of being subsumed by family, by society? Is there a middle ground, a place between exile and the stifling forces of conformity?

“House Guest” (1968),<sup>50</sup> written three years before “In the Waiting Room” and based loosely on the 1956 visit to Samambaia of the sister of one of Lota’s friends, takes what seems like a more formally structured, superficially removed, and humorous approach to the question of exile versus belonging. By turns witty, methodical, and chilling, it implies and builds on the poet’s aforementioned preoccupation with both regularity and irregularity as well as a drive to establish intimacy with the world and its creatures through compassionate and yet distanced observation (Millier, *Life* 410-411). Comprising nine stanzas of varying length (the average is six lines), the poem registers as accentual with three strong stresses per line. The underlying pulse (I hesitate to say metrical scheme) swings between the iambic and the trochaic. The subject of the poem, a “sad seamstress” (a commercial executor of one of the most iconic domestic arts), remains incongruously and infuriatingly impermeable to the lure of hospitality:

u / / u  
The sad seamstress  
u / u / u /  
who stays with us this month  
u / u / u /u  
is small and thin and bitter.

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<sup>50</sup> Categorized as “Uncollected Work”.

/ / u / u /  
No one can cheer her up.  
/ u u / u /  
Give her a dress, || a drink,  
/ / u \ / /  
roast chicken, || or fried fish-  
u / u / u /  
it's all the same to her. (1-7)

In the second six-line stanza, the speaker zooms in more closely on the hapless outsider, focussing on her passivity and stasis:

u / u / u //  
She sits and watches TV.  
/ u / u / /  
No, || she watches zigzags.  
/ u u / u //  
"Can you adjust the TV?"  
/ u u / /  
"No," || she says. || No hope.  
u / u / u /  
She watches on and on,  
u / / u / /  
without hope, || without air. (8-13)

Dotted with repetition (“TV”; “No”; “hope”; “on”; “without”), rattling with spondaic syllables, and lightened by the poet’s characteristic use of epanorthosis in Line 9, the poem gives the faintest of hints that something of the autobiographical might be unfolding. The seamstress who “watches zigzags” is unable to latch onto the linear, the presence of a straight narrative, even as she herself is condemned to be the one who

“watches on and on.” In the third of the six-line stanzas, the speaker ponders the subject’s socioeconomic resources and the rewards of the craft that root her in the outside world:

u / / / u /  
Her own clothes give us pause,  
u / u u / / u  
but she's not a poor orphan.  
u / u /u u / u  
She has a father, || a mother,  
u / / u u / u  
and all that, || and she's earning  
/ / u / / u  
quite well, || and we're stuffing  
u u / u u /  
her with fattening foods. (14-19)

The seamstress seems to come—unlike Bishop—from a background of perceived stability; the upswing in the rhythm from trochaic to iambic seems to mirror this, as does the triple-metre skip in the stanza’s last line. Certainly, the speaker has not exhausted all possibilities in engaging the outsider seamstress. The trope of looking outwards and upwards (as seen in “Sleeping on the Ceiling”) reappears as the speaker makes futile comic gestures towards a distant other-place, where militarism, children, and nationalism might exert a draw on the poem’s grouchy subject:

u u / u u / u u /uu  
We invite her to use the binoculars.  
u / / / u /  
We say, || "Come see the jets!"  
u / / / u /u  
We say, || "Come see the baby!"  
u u / /u u /uu  
Or the knife grinder who cleverly

/ u / u u / u  
plays the National Anthem  
\ u / u /u  
on his wheel so shrilly.  
/ u /  
Nothing helps. (20-26)

The seamstress refuses to play the game of assimilation; the addition of the flatly-stated Line 26 (“**Nothing helps**”—a cretic) amplifies the awkwardness. However, the gravitas behind the seamstress’s outsider status is illuminated in Lines 26 to 29, where a hat trick of similes emphasizes the seamstress’s wilful isolation from the world:

u / u / u u /  
Her face is closed as a nut,  
/ u u / u /  
closed as a careful snail  
u u / u / u /  
or a thousand-year-old seed. (26-38)

The idea of a hermetically sealed natural micro-environment was one that resonated with Bishop and inspired other work. In her prose persona poem “Giant Snail” (1969), the poet inhabits the body of the eponymous tropical creature that moves carefully, admired but unknown. For the snail—as for the observer Bishop—holding oneself back from the more harmful aspects of what is observed/experienced is the only means of survival:

I give the impression of mysterious ease, but it is only with the greatest effort of my will that I can rise above the smallest stones and sticks. And I must not let myself be distracted by those rough spears of grass. Don’t touch them. Draw back. Withdrawal is always best. (“Giant Snail”)

Returning to the sixth stanza of “House Guest,” however, we see that the “impression of mysterious ease” given by the “careful snail” does not apply to our seamstress. On the contrary: the spectre of irregularity and misfitting appears to hang over her life, tainting her efforts at domestic craft:

/ u / u / u  
Does she dream of marriage?  
u /u / u /u  
of getting rich? || Her sewing  
u u /uu /u/u  
Is decidedly mediocre (39-41)

The speaker does reveal, in the seventh stanza (another with seven lines, as opposed to six), that the seamstress had once longed for a closed environment of her own but was thwarted in her desires (“she wanted to be a nun / and her family opposed her” [47-48]).

The speaker reacts, in the eighth stanza, with a four-line truncated variation of the six-line “base” stanza with a mixture of implied solidarity and exasperation:

u / u u / u /  
Perhaps we should let her go,  
u u /u / / /  
or deliver her straight off  
u u / u / u u /u  
to the nearest convent || — and wasn’t  
u / / / / /u u  
her month up last week, || anyway? (49-52)

The last line here, with its rattling spondaic rhythm, amplifies the speaker’s consternation with the poem’s subject, but it also establishes itself as a foil for what is to come. The



final stanza of “House Guest” (another seven-line variation) switches into a metrical rhythm that feels decidedly rising and stately; it lays out a meditation on fate, determinism, and the fear of irregularity and exile:

/ u / u u / u  
Can it be that we nourish  
/ u u / u u / u  
one of the Fates in our bosoms?  
/ u / u u /  
Clotho, || sewing our lives  
u u /u /u /  
with a bony little foot  
u u / u / u u \  
on a borrowed sewing machine,  
u u / u / u /  
and our fates will be like hers,  
u u / / u u/(u)  
and our hems crooked forever? (53-59)

The speaker’s rhetorical question seems to address Bishop’s own anguish in seeing herself as a “house guest” in Brazil, loved by Lota, offered a wealth of luxuries, and yet set apart by language, class, depression, and addiction (Millier, *Life* 8). For Bishop, meticulousness in observation and craft (including revision) was central to her approach; however, in the words of Deborah M. Mix, Bishop differed from her mentor Marianne Moore in that “she pulled away from Moore’s belief that stability can be found or maintained through art” (263). Her incarnation of Clotho, one of the Greek Fates, alludes to this; as one arm of a tripartite domestic metaphor for the determinism that governs human life, she is imagined as being reduced to the level of the seamstress, drained and

shrunken, dependent on a “borrowed sewing machine” for the process of fashioning lives. As an exile (and as a maker emerging from poetic tradition), is it that Bishop sees herself dealing in borrowed goods in order to make poems—and a life—that will forever be crooked? “House Guest,” as it “zig-zags” between stanzas of regular and irregular length, between the tenderness of compassionate observation and the archness of satire, can be seen as a work which incorporates the previously examined themes of regularity and intimacy while pointedly considering the perspective of a perennial outsider, reflecting upon how these three “threads” (to follow through on the poem’s guiding metaphor) weave their way through the artistic production that results.

Compounding Bishop’s sense of disconnect—her awareness of her own “crooked hem”—was her overweening (and understandable) sense of inherited deviancy. As previously mentioned, Bishop lived in abject fear of inheriting her mother’s predisposition to mental illness. Compounding this was her deep shame at the dependence on alcohol which had begun at Vassar and had spiralled into a destructive pattern of binge drinking punctuated by periods of sobriety. Bishop’s drinking—dwelt on in Millier’s 1993 biography *Life and the Memory of It* and detailed more intensively sixteen years later in *Flawed Light: American Poets and Alcohol*—played into and complicated the poet’s vision of herself as an exile. Bishop’s 1951 poem “The Prodigal” (written at Yaddo, immediately prior to her departure for South America)<sup>51</sup> was breezily described by the poet, in a letter to U.T. and Joseph Summers, as having been inspired by an encounter

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<sup>51</sup> ACS.

with the stepson of a relative who “offered [Bishop] a drink of rum, in the pigsties, at about nine in the morning when [she] was visiting her in Nova Scotia” (*One Art: Letters* 478-479). In reality, the work, originally titled “The Prodigal Son,” feels startlingly immediate, even with the remove offered through the use of a third-person masculine pronoun and the structure incorporating two 14-line stanzas—effectively, a diptych of modulated sonnets that unfold with a characteristically iambic flow:

u / u / u / u \ / /  
 The brown | enor | mous od | or he | lived by  
 u / / \ u / u u / /  
 was too | close, || with | its breath | ing and | thick hair,  
 u / u / u / u / u u /  
 for him | to judge. || The floor | was rot | ten; || the sty  
 u / u / \ / u / / /  
 was plast | ered half | way up | with glass | -smooth dung.  
 / / u / u u / / u /  
 Light-lashed, || self-right | eous, || a | bove mov | ing snouts,  
 u / / / u / u / u /  
 the pigs' | eyes fol | lowed him, || a cheer | ful stare--  
 / u u u / u / u / u /  
 even | to the sow | that al | ways ate | her young--  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 till, sick | ening, || he leaned | to scratch | her head.  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 But some | times morn | ings af | ter drink | ing bouts  
 u / u / u / u / \ /  
 (he hid | the pints | behind | the two | -by-fours),  
 u / \ / u / \ / u /  
 the sun | rise glazed | the barn | yard mud | with red  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 the bur | ning pud | dles seemed | to re | assure.  
 u / u / u / \ / u /  
 And then | he thought | he al | most might | endure  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 his ex | ile yet | anoth | er year | or more. (1-14)

The use of the pentameter here is neither plodding nor stagnant: there is a fluidity to the narrative trajectory of the first stanza lent by liberal enjambment and the breath-pauses created by caesurae. Spondees might be perceived as staccato “gags” in response to the fetid smell (e.g. “The brown enormous odor he **lived by**/ was **too close** with its breathing and **thick hair**”), and an initial trochee coupled with an anapaestic skip in Line 7 (“even to the **sow** that always ate her young”) captures the fleeting heart-stop of horror that might be sensed at the mention of bestial cannibalism. But the metre and the line length hold out; there is a sense of acceptance, if not resignation, mirrored by the regularity. The prodigal son is suspended within the “logic” of his circumstances—there is acceptance and something like love in the attention of the cannibal pigs. There is a place to hide the contraband alcohol, mirrored in the image of the “burning puddles” that trap the prodigal like a circle of fire and yet offer their own means of assuring temporary comfort. However, the second sonnet-stanza presents the reader with a mirror-image/resulting revelation:

u / u \ u / / / u /  
 But ev | enings | the first | star came | to warn.  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 The farm | er whom | he worked | for came | at dark  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 to shut | the cows | and hor | ses in | the barn  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 beneath | their ov | erhang | ing clouds | of hay,  
 u / / / / / u / u /  
 with pitch | forks, || faint | forked light | nings, || catch | ing light,

/ u u / u u \ u / u /  
 safe and | compan | ionable | as in | the Ark.  
 u / / / u / u / u /  
 The pigs | stuck out | their lit | tle feet | and snored.  
 u / u / u / /u u /  
 The lan | tern || --like | the sun, || going | away--  
 / u u / u / u / u\  
 laid on | the mud | a pa | cing aur | eole.  
 / u u u / u u / u / u /  
 Carry | ing a buck | et along | a sli | my board,  
 u / u / u / u / u u /  
 he felt | the bats' | uncert | ain stag | gering flight,  
 u / u \ u / u / u u /  
 his shud | dering | in sights, || beyond | his control,  
 (u)/ u \ u u / u u / /  
 touch | ing him. || But it took | him a | long time  
 (u)/ u \ u / u u / u / /  
 fin | ally | to make | up his mind | to go home. (15-28)

The second stanza shifts from a secular Bosch-like mock-domestic vision into a presentation of more Biblical premonitions—there is the presence of “the first star” that has arrived “to warn” the poem’s subject. The metre of the stanza remains constant as the cows and horses are shut away for the night (their presence merges with that of the star to suggest the cusp of a new Nativity). When the reader comes to Line 19, they are faced with a curiously jarring moment: the pitchforks that loom over the sleeping animals—aided by a spondee-laden, friction-producing flight of /f/ sounds, and repetition (“**-forks, faint forked lightnings** catching light”)—almost seem to give off sparks. In Line 22, the lantern is described in a brusque trochaic mid-line variation as “like the sun, / **going away.**” In the dark of the night, his companions asleep, the prodigal is left to fully contemplate his exile and perceived sense of defilement. In transit along the Rubicon of

“a slimy board,” the subject of the poem is, in Lines 24 and 25, beset by bats; the movement of the creatures, driven home by adjectives with double medial consonants (“staggering”; “shuddering”) and anapaestic variations, seems almost to present a wobble that threatens to topple the prodigal from his seat of false domestic comfort. Were there any doubts on this point, the final two lines push the use of variation to the extreme: Lines 27 and 28 each begin with a headless iamb. Line 27, using the dramatic pause of a strong caesura followed by an anapaest and a double iamb, drags out the excruciating prospect that faces the prodigal—one which spills over into the final line. Here, a headless iamb gives way to two regular iambs, an anapaest, and the punch of a final bacchius (“to **go home**”). As if to compound the drama and mystery of the prodigal’s epiphany, there is the use of “to make up his mind” as a transmitter of the decision process. “Decide” may have been more economical, certainly. However, “make up” conveys, on Bishop’s part, not only the agency of the exile but also his power (also as an exile) to create out of nothing—“to make up.” Creation—the imposition of form and the variations that move throughout—is inextricably linked not only to art but also to the act of home-seeking and self-forgiveness.

Ravithiran, in *Elizabeth Bishop’s Prosaic*, cites Penelope Laurans when he draws attention to how a deeper motivation lies behind the poet’s use of variation. Laurans states that, through the poet’s use of strategic changes to the base metre, “the reader is never allowed to forget himself and to be transported by the momentum of the verse” and that “the metric roughness keeps him detached” (24). Ravithiran takes this particular ball and

runs with it, amplifying the import that variation brings, how it can shift consciousness to questions of reclaimed power and responsibility:

If the danger of romantic vagueness, of the poetic mode Bishop inherits, is of the reader “forgetting himself” in Wordsworthian lyric “transport,” then what, rightly, should her verse do instead? The alternative must be to make the reader remember herself and the world; to become more dextrously evaluative, more sensuously, politically and philosophically attentive; to strengthen those forms of attention which may be common to all of us, or singularly her own. To forget oneself would mean being reduced to one state of emotion only, putting aside that variability of emotional rhythm which Bishop annexes to poetry by way of prose. (24)

If we look at “The Prodigal” through the lens of Laurans’s and Ravithiran’s words, we might consider the regularity of the first stanza to be an illustration of “self-forgetting,” the aimless drifting of a lost and falsely lulled soul through a dreamscape of filth and self-denial. A shadow home is made and presents itself as something that the prodigal “might endure” just a little longer. However, the second sonnet-stanza throws the prodigal into the uncertainty of night and a place of rebirth and newly claimed agency while taking into account the “variability of emotional rhythm.” The old regularity must be done away with in order to render the prodigal—and the reader—more “attentive” and therefore open to an unclouded home-claiming process. Millier succinctly sums up the role of the “making up” of will in “The Prodigal”—and how it connects to Bishop herself, saying:

... what links [the poem] most to Bishop’s own self-described experience of alcoholism is its presentation of a person exiled from normal human relationships, from “home” by his own bestial behaviour. Living among pigs, he is at times inured to the smell, the mud, the dung, but Bishop insists that his exile is at least in part a matter of will—the prodigal, the wastrel, not

yet having decided to return to be forgiven, need only decide and he may return. (Millier, *Flawed Light* 138)

And yet, it would seem wrong to write off the “self-forgetting” of the first stanza of “The Prodigal” as merely representative of pure moral/spiritual failing. Even in this environment, sealed within the relatively regular framework of the sonnet and of the iambic pentametrical line, there is a carved-out space for privacy. Similarly, the decision to “go home,” which the speaker lays out in the second stanza, is synonymous with that to rejoin a society that is potentially censorious and ultimately detrimental to the definition and authenticity of the self.

In “Tilting at Sense: Defensive Nonsense in Elizabeth Bishop,” Lee Upton uses “The Prodigal” as a point of comparison for Bishop’s uneasiness about joining society, fundamental mother-longing and loneliness notwithstanding, underlining that “the poet finds the notion of returning to human community after any absence to be difficult. To return is to acknowledge kinship and responsibility, and yet a form of self-estrangement” (Upton 57). A teacher at Walnut Hill School noted how the teenaged Bishop steered clear of her own encounters with “kinship and responsibility” in that she never mentioned her mother, thus perpetuating the pattern whereby nobody in her family spoke about her mother’s health and/or difficulties (Fountain and Brazeau 29). As Bishop recalled physical “regular” childhood domestic spaces as cold and emotionally-distanced environments (in contrast to the “warmer” extra-domestic environments she portrays in



works such as Nate the Blacksmith's shop in "In the Village" and the night bus in "The Moose"), so she came to equate a measure of denial/obscurity with self-protection.

A crucial presence in Bishop's life and early development as a poet was that of Marianne Moore. In Moore, Bishop discovered a friend whose affection, guidance, and artistic counsel filled—if partially—the gap left by an absent mother, albeit in a way which embodied rationality and caution. In a letter to Moore, the younger poet (reacting to the overbearing attentions of a friend's mother)<sup>52</sup> reappropriates the concept of cold as a means of keeping undesirable excesses of feeling (and, one might assume by extension, disappointments) at bay:

"Mother-love" — isn't it awful. I long for an Arctic climate where no emotions of any sort can possibly grow, — always excepting disinterested "friendship" of course. (qtd. in Millier, *Life* 25.)

Undoubtedly, Moore's adherence to Modernist aesthetics—significantly avoiding the personal and the sentimental—appealed to Bishop. In "The Imaginary Iceberg" (1936),<sup>53</sup> the first poem Bishop published outside of Vassar, the younger poet takes a page from Moore's book, combining detachment with meticulous detail and, in doing so, lays out a

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<sup>52</sup> The friend in question, Margaret Miller, sustained a life-changing injury in a car accident involving her, Bishop, and Louise Crane. The emotional reactions of Mrs. Miller would have been entirely normal, given the context. We might imagine that Bishop's words to Moore were rooted in her own family trauma, as well as the guilt she felt concerning the accident ( Millier, *Life* 123-125).

<sup>53</sup> *NS*.

declaration which contains a tentative blueprint for an *ars poetica* that helps the isolated individual to navigate the world:

u / u / u / u / u /  
We'd rath | er have | the ice | berg than | the ship,  
u / u / u / u / (u)  
although | it meant | the end | of travel.  
u / u / / / u / u /  
Although | it stood | stock-still | like clou | dy rock  
u / u / u / u / (u)  
and all | the sea | were mo | ving marble.  
u / u / u / u / u /  
We'd rath | er have | the ice | berg than | the ship;  
u / u / u / u / u /  
we'd rath | er own | this breath | ing plain | of snow  
u u / / / u / u / u /  
though the | ship's sails | were laid | upon | the sea  
u u / / / u / u / u / (u)  
as the snow | lies un | dissolved | upon | the water.  
u / u / u /  
O sol | emn, || float | ing field,  
u / u / u / u / u /  
are you | aware | an ice | berg takes | repose  
u / u / u / u / u / u /  
with you, || and when | it wakes | may pas | ture on | your snows? (1-11)

Note that the titular iceberg is *imaginary*, as opposed to remembered or even imagined.<sup>54</sup>

It is a two-sided creation; on the one hand, it suggests the actual *physical* iceberg that remains alien and uninhabitable, mirroring the world of intermittent coldness and domestic unreliability that Bishop had experienced as a child and which coloured her

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<sup>54</sup> Millier, in *Life*, also draws attention to the iceberg's being "imaginary", insofar as Bishop had not yet actually seen an iceberg prior to her writing of the poem (83-84).

perspective of home and the love that could (or couldn't) be found there. On the other hand, it can be viewed as embodying an alternate “breathing” organism that promises to “wake,” exists outside of the hurly-burly of life (and the rejections and trauma this life offers), and seeks to take up residence with the speaker, effectively making a home out of her. This iceberg is the work itself.

The poem, one of Bishop's more mysterious, sets up a dialectic between the iceberg—that which mirrors the made poem—and the spirit of the human soul represented by the ship (Millier, *Life* 84). Metrically speaking, the lines of the first eleven-line stanza are almost perfectly regular, save for the extra-syllable endings in Lines 2, 4, and 8 and the spondaic substitutions in Lines 3, 7, and 8. The effect is almost one of quiet suspension, where the reader can contemplate the made thing in tranquility. And yet, this made thing is hardly static. The iceberg, described as “moving marble” of the sea and a “breathing plain of snow,” is animated in its own right; the gentle elasticity of the iambic line (as it moves between pentameter, tetrameter and trimeter), coupled with the use of anaphora, gives this effect. In the second stanza, Bishop focuses the reader's attention further by bringing in a theatrical metaphor:

/ u u / u / u / u / (u)  
This is | a scene | a sail | or'd give | his eyes for.  
u / u / u / u / (u)  
The ship's | ignored. || The ice | berg rises  
u / u / u / u / u\  
and sinks | again; || its glas | sy pin | nacles  
u / u / u / u /  
correct | ellip | tics in | the sky.

/ u u / u / u / u /  
 This is | a scene | where he | who treads | the boards  
 u / u \ u / u \ u / (u)  
 is art | lessly | rhetor | ical. || The curtain  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 is light | enough | to rise | on fin | est ropes  
 u / u / u / u /  
 that ai | ry twists | of snow | provide.  
 u / u / / /  
 The wits | of these | white peaks  
 / u u / u / u / u /  
 spar with | the sun. || Its weight | the ice | berg dares  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 upon | a shift | ing stage | and stands | and stares. (12-22)

Although the iambic base metre continues to hold sway, the performative potential of the poem-iceberg is transmitted through dramatic flourishes. Lines 12, 16, and 21 stir to life with initial trochees. There is the curious archaic occurrence of elision in the first line (“sailor’d”). The reader’s breath is caught and held by the caesurae (in Lines 13, 14, 17, and 21). Finally, the proliferation of active verbs—including “rises” and “sinks,” which seem to move in unison with the rising and sinking of the poem’s iambic metre (Ellis 70)—causes the picture to bristle with motion. The third and final stanza draws the reader further into the inner workings of the iceberg, showing us how

u / u / u / u / u /  
 The ice | berg cuts | its fac | ets from | within.  
 u / u u / u /  
 Like jew | elry from | a grave  
 u / u / u / u \ u u /  
 it saves | itself | perpet | ually | and adorns  
 /u u / u / u /  
 only | itself, || perhaps | the snows

u / u / u / u / u /  
which so | surprise | us ly | ing on | the sea. (22-27)

The poem-iceberg is undoubtedly beautiful, majestic, and self-sufficient; however, its core suggests a kind of death (“Like jewelry from a grave”). It answers only to “itself” in terms of its process and effect. The speaker shifts us towards the awareness that human contact is indeed a necessity in the dual processes of observation and generation. As the speaker pulls away from the frigid allure of the iceberg, the spondee-heavy Line 28 chimes hopefully with a purpose that shatters the contemplative suspension of the poem’s first half:

/ / u / / / u / / /  
Good-bye, || we say, || good-bye, || the ship | steers off

and, in the wake of the ship’s departure, a metaphorical “thaw” occurs, as attention shifts from the cold, marble-like “waves” surrounding the iceberg to those executed by human hands:

u / u / u / u / u /  
where waves | give in | to one | anoth | er’s waves  
u / / \ u / u /  
and clouds | run in | a warm | er sky. (29-30)

The proposed “Arctic climate, where no emotions of any sort can possibly grow” is of no use in generating poems. It is, in short, no home for the poet, least of all for Bishop. The

final three lines sum up, with directness and solemnity, the absolute need for human contact:

/ u u / u /  
Icebergs | behoove | the soul  
/ \u / / u / u u / / (uu)  
(both being | self-made | from el | ements | least visible)  
u / u / / / u / u / u / (uu)  
to see | them so: || | fleshed, fair, || erect | ed in | divisible. (31-33)

The use of an initial trochee (“**I**cebergs”) in Line 31 directs our attention to this shift in perception, as do the half-antibacchius (“**both being**”), the spondee (“**self-made**”) and the double iamb (“-lements **least vis-**”) in Line 32. The iceberg—the poem—the speaker tells us, cannot do without the human soul. As the iceberg is the sum of its parts seen and unseen (i.e. beneath the surface), the soul is permitted a “least visible” component to work alongside (or in spite of) that which is visible. Thus, Bishop asserts that three currents of symbiosis are at work: that between the poem-iceberg and the soul, that between the poem-iceberg and its hidden elements, and that between the soul’s conscious life and its unconscious life. In asserting these multiple dynamics, Bishop implies that the “home” of the poet (at least the poet she is) is neither in a social world devoid of craft nor in an “Arctic climate” arid of feeling. There are permeable membranes between these states; how one crosses them to access inspiration is a matter of judgment.

The influence of “The Imaginary Iceberg” and its references to shadow worlds and the seeming-purifying qualities of a cold, sorrow-numbing realm can be perceived in “The Black Swan” (1951) by James Merrill, another close friend whom Bishop had come

to know during her days in Brazil with Lota and who shared with Bishop the freight of childhood trauma.<sup>55</sup> In “The Black Swan,” Merrill describes, in five regular seven-line stanzas, a child-self observing and being drawn to the titular bird, whose otherness leaves “[a] private chaos warbling in its wake” (3) and whose presence implies the existence of a shadow realm where pain might be reckoned with, preserved within the crystalline eternity of cold:

Enchanter: the black swan has learned to enter  
Sorrow’s lost secret center  
Where, like a May fête, separate tragedies  
Are wound in ribbons round the pole to share  
A hollowness, a marrow of pure winter  
That does not change but is  
Always brilliant ice and air. (22-28)

Like Bishop, Merrill grappled with a sense of unbelonging. His preoccupation with separate alternate hidden worlds would reoccur in works such as “Annie Hill’s Grave” (1962), “Lost in Translation” (1976), and, most markedly, in his epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982).

“The Imaginary Iceberg” is characteristic of the poems that make up one subsection of *North and South* (others include “A Miracle for Breakfast,” “Casabianca,” and “The Unbeliever”) in that it marries detached, oblique, almost surreal perspectives

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<sup>55</sup> Born into privilege, Merrill was deeply affected by his parents’ divorce and the childhood neglect which ensued. Like Bishop, he was queer; the difference between him and Bishop, in this regard, was that extreme wealth afforded the younger poet a greater degree of freedom in terms of social positioning (“James Merrill”).

with crisply defined forms. Rather than serve as mere foils for the more mysterious elements, the forms of these poems share the same kind of symbiotic relationship with their content as the iceberg and the ship and/or the soul and its shadow side. There is the effort to maintain privacy—to keep a safe distance from sentimentalism—but there is a vital interplay that defeats the assumption of "boxing in" that often accompanies ideas around the use of form. As the quote from Molly Peacock, which I have included in the epigraph to this dissertation points out, form goes beyond being merely a convenient container; rather, "[i]t acts as a skeleton as well as a skin. It is a body. Verse form literally embodies the emotion of the poem, in the sense that embodiment both *is* and *contains* the life it is the body of" (178). In this way, anxiety and trauma—"the danger"—are both encompassed and given life by the poem form itself. They are neither masked nor denied; rather, they are noted and honoured and made all the more real for the reader/listener.

As we move through Bishop's poems, we come to discern a distinct pattern: as she seeks and anchors herself in sites of domestic stability (and as she loses these and moves on to the next), she allows the contours of her forms to relax, while her discourse becomes less obscure and more narrative and personal. If we permit ourselves to make an elaborate metaphorical leap, we might envision this, in domestic terms, as the gradual shift from the kind of "rigid house" named in "Sestina" containing either impenetrable musings or cautious observations, to a kind of mobile poetic caravan, shaped by metrical contours and yet tempered by experience and adaptable to further changes and new intimacies.



Bishop herself would have been the last to have gone into such detail about her own work and what its development might be compared to. She shied away from discussing her own poetry and was generally averse to teaching it; she similarly harboured a mistrust of academics and the theoretical treatment of her craft. As for performance, it evoked in the poet apprehension and avoidance. The recordings of Bishop which exist to this day neither venture into the earlier formalized declamatory styles favoured by Louise Bogan or Edna St. Vincent Millay nor echo the theatrical, performance-ready patterns of Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsberg, and Sexton (whose attraction to performance I will touch upon in the next chapter). On the contrary, in performing her work aloud, Bishop adapted (or retreated to) a style which might have (by confessional poetry standards) come across as self-effacing to the point of seeming apologetic. When one understands the poet's need for privacy, however, coupled with her according primacy to the poem itself, this public reticence makes sense. Of Bishop's readings, the poet, essayist, and critic Katha Pollitt had the following to say:

Miss Bishop was a terrific reader, and she was a great inspiration to me. She read her poems in a very down-to-earth, person-to-person way. She didn't have any irritating mannerisms. She didn't posture in any way. She barely raised her voice. I thought she was great, because what she was saying is, I am here and I will read you these poems I have written, but these poems are made objects, they are written on a page, and that is where their real life is. (qtd. in Fountain and Brazeau 278)

As mentioned earlier, Bishop had always deeply mistrusted the confessional impulse, and this extended to its non-performative aspects as well. In a letter to Lowell

describing her take on Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960),<sup>56</sup> she applauded the younger poet's skill while lamenting her forays into descriptions of sexuality and mental illness, saying, "I feel as if I know too much about her" (*Words in Air* 327). On a more intense level, when Lowell later published *The Dolphin* in 1973, a collection which drew source material from his correspondence with Elizabeth Hardwick,<sup>57</sup> Bishop was aghast at the violation of Hardwick's privacy (Fountain and Brazeau 309, 341). In short, Bishop's view on poetry that banked on expression and "authenticity" can be summed up in her oft-quoted exasperated proclamation in a 1967 interview with *Time Magazine*: "You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves" (qtd. in Xiaoqing 76). As much as she loved Lowell, Bishop wished *he* had kept things to himself (and not inspired legions of students to do otherwise).<sup>58</sup>

From examining personal accounts of friends and perusing the poet's notebooks and correspondence, we learn that the person Bishop was hardest on regarding self-restraint was herself. On January 6, 1967, Lota was deeply unwell following a mental collapse; the result was that her doctor counselled Bishop to leave the Rio apartment the two women shared. Distraught, the poet packed a suitcase and decamped to a hotel, where she read Auden and then made the following notes:

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<sup>56</sup> May 19, 1960.

<sup>57</sup> Lowell's wife from 1949 to 1972.

<sup>58</sup> Even by Lowell's death in 1977, the rift that resulted from this disagreement had not fully healed (Marshall 255-257).

Much more important and from now on - January 6, 1967 -  
NEVER forget this:

“One ceases to be a child when one realizes that telling one’s troubles does not make it any better.” Cesare Pavese

(This would not seem to apply to telling it to doctors, but to friends.)

Auden adds: “Exactly. Not even telling it to oneself. [Most] of us have known shameful moments when we blubbered, beat the wall with our fists, cursed the power which made us and the world, and wished we were dead or that someone else was. But at such times, the I of the sufferer should have the tact and decency to look the other way.” (qtd. in Millier, *Life* 384-385)

In writing these private reflections, Bishop is effectively swearing full allegiance to the anti-confessional. It was a code that she emphatically imparted to her students—at a moment in history where the imperative to remain private and avoid straightforward expression was seen as counter-countercultural. What exasperated Bishop the most, however, was not the urge to confess as much as the utter and total negation of craft, which was now deemed by a younger generation as a patriarchal, conservative construct that contaminated authenticity. For Bishop, craft was not the opposite of truth but rather the essential mechanism that allowed truth to flourish on a different plane. It might be said that poetic form in Bishop’s work mirrors the privacy sought in “safe” domestic environments in that it not only contains but also (as per Peacock’s definition in this dissertation’s epigraph) encompasses and animates from the inside out. There is a “bustling” within the

poem-space, which allows the poet to share and convey without delving into the perilous territory of confession.

Bishop's journey to achieve privacy in the body of her work was an involved one; it found itself rooted in the poet's early coming to terms (or lack thereof) with her identity as a woman and her sexuality. Biographical material contributed by Millier, Fountain and Brazeau, and Marshall suggests that Bishop had remained relatively disengaged from (if not oblivious to) her early erotic awakening;<sup>59</sup> what came in its stead was a literary awakening coloured by the influence of male poetic mentors (Herbert, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Stevens) who privileged solitude, rigour, regularity, objective observation, and the practice of self-questioning without engaging in public evisceration of the soul. Although the adult Bishop considered herself a feminist insofar as she valued female equality, agency, and progress, she largely and loosely proceeded along sex-neutral lines with regard to the business of making poems and the public presentation that accompanied this. She refused to be classified as a "woman poet" and anthologized as such (Millier, *Life* 17; Fountain and Brazeau 329). Bishop had no desire to be lumped into a camp, and this extended to the necessary question of her queerness; Merrill notes how, during the younger poet's visit to Brazil, Bishop explicitly told

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<sup>59</sup> Millier cites how, as a schoolgirl at Walnut Hill, the poet consciously played down her femininity, also saying, however, that "Elizabeth seems not to have permitted her emerging homosexuality to come to consciousness, despite being surrounded by examples of lesbian relationships among her teachers and classmates" (*Life* 56).

him “how she didn’t like being typed as a lesbian” (Millier, *Life* 267). This might have seemed prudent in the period leading up to the mid-1960s when homosexuality was still considered “deviant” and, therefore, dangerous, a threat to Cold War domestic norms.<sup>60</sup> Reticent temperament aside, Bishop herself feared the cycles of history that might lead to the unravelling of a presumed liberal tolerance of queerness. In the words of friend Frank Bidart:

The skepticism she felt about the gay rights movement was based on her sense that straight society would never truly accept homosexuality, that sooner or later it would punish writers for “coming out.” She was worried that the candor of what I had written would at some point be used against me professionally, and in warning me said that she “believed in closets, closets, and more closets.”... Out of her distrust of the straight world she didn’t want people to know she was gay. She certainly didn’t want people to talk about it. The irony, of course, is that everyone at least in the literary world *did* know and didn’t care; but she could never believe this was the case. (Bidart qtd. in Fountain and Brazeau 327)

This is not to say that Bishop did not use her love affairs as inspiration; unpublished works, such as “It is Marvellous to Wake Up Together,” “Dear, my compass,” “Close, close all night,” and particularly “Vague Poem,” and “Breakfast Song”<sup>61</sup> offer startling glimpses into Bishop’s erotic life. The work touching on intimacy that Bishop did publish

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<sup>60</sup> Bishop was well aware of this, even in the company of members of the literary establishment. *The New Yorker*, long-time supporters and publishers of Bishop’s work, rejected not only the coyly subversive “Exchanging Hats” (1956, unpublished) but also “The Shampoo”, which eventually found a home in *The New Republic* (*Elizabeth Bishop and the New Yorker* xxiv-xxv, xxvi, 112-114, 152).

<sup>61</sup> *Edgar Allen Poe and the Juke-Box*.

displays a characteristic cautiousness that is nonetheless redrafted as an invitation to observe with the speaker, to experience love through the act of taking in detail. Perhaps the most thrilling of them all is the last poem Bishop published prior to her sudden death from an aneurysm in 1979. “Sonnet” takes liberties with its titular form in that its lines are breezily truncated to dimeter and that, in being read aloud, it hits the ear as accentual rather than foot-based. Although this is distinctly a sonnet in the strictest rhetorical sense—divided into an octave and sestet that propose a problem and a solution (or an argument and an answer)—another play on inversion takes hold. Bishop switches the traditional (octave-sestet) order native to a Petrarchan sonnet, presenting us with a rhetorical rebalancing. The opening sestet seizes our attention immediately:

/            u / u  
Caught || —the bubble  
u u / u /u  
in the spirit-level,  
u / u u /u  
a creature divided;  
u u / u /u  
and the compass needle  
/ u u u /u u  
wobbling and wavering,  
/ u /u  
undecided. (1-6)

The first syllable here carries a strong stress, set off by an equally forceful caesura. The vacillation between stressed and unstressed syllables at the start of the lines works in tandem with the images of the trapped bubble in a carpenter’s tool and the compass

needle, both of which have been forced to choose a side with which to align. The half-rhymes that end Lines 1, 2 and 4, along with the conjoined dactylic present participle adjectives in Line 5—“**wobbling** and **wavering**”—add texture and tension as the speaker sets out their predicament. However, whatever tension has accumulated is released in the octave:

/            u    / u  
 Freed || —the broken  
 u   / u u    / u u  
 thermometer’s mercury  
 /   u   u /  
 running away;  
 u   u   / u   /  
 and the rainbow-bird  
 u   u   / u   / u  
 from the narrow bevel  
 u u   / u   / u  
 of the empty mirror,  
 /   u   u /u  
 flying wherever  
 u   /   /   /  
 it feels like, || gay! (7-14)

It is another strongly stressed isolated adjective (“**Freed**—“) that launches the “solution” of the octave. The theme of calibration and measurement set up by the spirit-level-compass images in the sestet is overturned with the breaking of the thermometer. The conjured figure of the “rainbow-bird” might be viewed as the reverse image of the tame crow in “Manners,” which “answers / nicely when ... spoken to” (17-18); it emerges as a glint off “the empty mirror,” an object that offers no reflection and instead becomes a

symbol of vastation, an emptying out of negative resonance, of regret, of the need to become the image of something else. The poem celebrates freedom, and yet a warm hum of sonic unity makes itself felt, particularly within the octave. There is near-perfect metrical alignment in Lines 10 and 11, which also feature a half-rhyme in “rainbow” and “narrow” and a link with “bird” and “bevel.” In Lines 11 and 12, we feel the medial consonant purr connecting “narrow” and “mirror.” These occurrences of sonic harmony provide a build-up to the poem’s two final lines, which allow the bird (and the author) to burst out into life, with the last word laying claim to both its old-world connotations of unbridled joy and its link to the active ownership of sexual identity. It is both fitting and poignant that “Sonnet” was Bishop’s last published poem. Contemplating its microcosm, where escape and celebration are supported by the delicately drawn but necessary traces of formal stringency and metre, we see how Bishop built homes in miniature through her work to the very end, to inhabit and to escape from, but also to provide shelter and inspiration to the readers and fellow outsiders who had—or would—find themselves at home in her poems.



## CHAPTER TWO

### “A certain sense of order there”: Care, Containment, Redefinition, and the Formal Voice of Anne Sexton

On October 4, 1974, wearing her late mother’s fur coat and carrying a glass of vodka, Anne Sexton went into the family garage at 14 Black Oak Road in Weston, Massachusetts and secured the door firmly behind her. She climbed into her prized cherry-red Cougar, settled back, started the ignition and—never one to ignore a habit—turned on the radio. Outside the garage and beyond the tidy suburban house, the New England autumn was erupting gloriously in what the poet had called its “sourball colours.” The friends whom Sexton had met with that day—Louise Conant and Maxine Kumin—had been given no inkling as to what her immediate intentions might have been. Only Sexton’s therapist, Barbara Schwartz, had wondered at her patient’s gesture of leaving her Salems and lighter tucked behind a bowl of flowers. For a chain smoker like Sexton, such a move was unthinkable.

Sexton’s suicide came admittedly as no great shock to those who knew her, including her ex-husband and daughters, her friends, and her peers in the poetry community (Middlebrook,<sup>62</sup> *Anne Sexton: A Biography* 396, 387). Since the birth of her second daughter Joyce in 1955, she had survived numerous breakdowns and suicide attempts, and her work had taken no prisoners in how it detailed the jumbled miseries of the psychological landscape she inhabited, including the attraction to death. Even as an academically unschooled “outsider” from the realm of white middle-class suburbia, with

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<sup>62</sup> Referred to hereinafter as *ASB*.

its attendant gendered expectations and social codes, Sexton had made her presence felt in the world of mid-century American women's poetics. Her fame at its height propelled her to almost rock-star status, plugging into the zeitgeist that favoured experiments with the confessional that had been seen in the poems of Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, and the mid-to-later career work of Robert Lowell. This status endured to some extent, even as her poetic output unspooled into rawer, almost stream-of-consciousness free-verse territory that broke with her usual practice of careful editing and methodical rewrites and took considerable liberties with imagistic excess (Sexton and Ames 389-391). In spite of this—and the chaos that was dogging her personal affairs—Sexton's life had always counted on an ingrained sense of procedural order. By the summer of 1974, the poet had approached friends to ask which of her possessions they might like to have; she had chosen a biographer and a literary executor and drafted a will (Sexton and Ames 423). There were micro-signs, such as the cigarettes and the lighter behind the flowers. There was, to use the weary adage, method in Anne Sexton's madness.

Out of the three poets discussed in this dissertation, it is perhaps Sexton whose life best embodied the particular fusion of privilege and despair documented and taken to task by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. The product of a solidly upper-middle-class, if fraught, upbringing, Sexton had married young, eloping, at the age of twenty, with a medical student named Alfred Muller "Kayo" Sexton II. In keeping with the desire for the semblance of security and respectability that Cold War-era American family life required,

Kayo dropped out of medical school and went to work for Anne's businessman father, Ralph Harvey. Two daughters arrived in quick succession: Linda in 1953 and Joyce in 1955. Motherhood overwhelmed Sexton and led to a psychiatric crisis that would mark her for the rest of her life. What initially seemed to resemble the postpartum "blues" spiralled into disorientation, agitation, and eventually rage; she turned on her children with abusive ferocity, fearing that she would kill them if left alone. Sexton's then-psychiatrist, Dr. Martha Brunner-Orne, who had already treated her in the wake of a suicide attempt, suggested that she be hospitalized for three weeks. In August 1956, Sexton was discharged and placed in the care of Brunner-Orne's son, Dr. Martin Orne. Only a year older than his patient, Orne evoked in her a sense of confidence and solidarity. A piece of therapeutic writing addressed to the young psychiatrist sheds light on a textbook example of the affliction that Friedan would take on six years later:

I am so alone--nothing seems worth while [sic] — I walk from room to room trying to think of something to do — for a while I will do something, make cookies or clean the bathroom — make beds — answer the telephone — but all along I have this almost terrible energy in me and nothing seems to help...I sit in a chair and try to read a magazine ... Then I walk up and down the room — back and forth — and I feel like a caged tiger ...

My heart pounds and it's all I can hear — my feeling for my children does not surpass my desire to be free of their demands upon my emotions...What have I got? Who would want to live feeling that way? (qtd. in Middlebrook, *ASB* 36)

Like the women in Friedan's study, Sexton was limited by logistical, sociological, and ideological factors: she had found herself called into service in the American Cold War-

era project which privileged the building and maintenance of the ordered suburban domicile that enforced accepted gender norms and morally “appropriate” conformist behaviour. On top of this, she was the victim of a particular triple immolation; her life and outlook were framed and shaped, not only by the system that aimed to confine white middle-class women like her to the home but also by a personal legacy of childhood trauma involving alcoholism, perceived neglect, emotional (and possibly sexual) abuse, and—crucially—by mental illness. The saving grace in Sexton’s life would be the way in which the “terrible energy” that she had described to Orne would find its outlet in poetry; that being said, Sexton’s engagement with her practice would come at no small cost. In a letter dated September 24, 1965, she wryly—and somewhat mournfully—noted the clash between worlds and motivations that would imprint both her life and career:<sup>63</sup>

I do not live a poet’s life. I look and act like a housewife. My daughter says to her friends “a mother is someone who types all day.” But still I cook. But still my desk is a mess of letters to be answered and poems that want to tear their way out of my soul and onto the typewriter keys. At that point I am a lousy cook, a lousy wife, a lousy mother, because I am too busy wrestling with the poem to remember that I am a normal (?) American housewife.” (Sexton and Ames 270)

Over the course of eighteen years and eight books (two others would appear after her death), Sexton would reframe the telling of domestic stories as greater metaphysical examinations of wellness versus illness, parental abandonment, betrayal, sexual autonomy, and the search for God. Crucial to this telling—and, one might argue, to her

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<sup>63</sup> Written to the British poet and critic Jon Stallworthy.

survival during the process—would be the role of form. Indeed, Sexton’s situation is a paradox: on the one hand, had it not been for form in its larger sense—the imposition of an oppressive family structure, the social confines of mid-20th century American domestic ideals, and the dictates of (largely male) medical and educational authority figures—Anne Sexton the poet might have never existed. And yet, on the other hand, Sexton’s attraction to and use of poetic forms seemed to emerge organically, as we shall soon see. But how did Anne Sexton the housewife become Anne Sexton the poet? The turning point is generally encapsulated in a moment which featured a confluence of technologies both old and new.

One night, in 1956, Sexton switched on the family television. Having refitted the set with a new antenna in order to “self-improve” through (on Orne’s advice) the watching of cultural programming, she flicked through until she landed on the WGBH program *Sense of Poetry*. Its host, Professor I.A. Richards of Harvard University, was giving a lecture on the sonnet. Sexton was electrified by the patterns of lines and sound. “I thought, well I could do that,” she recalled in an interview, “So I went downstairs and wrote one” (Middlebrook, *ASB* 42; Doherty 8). Unequipped with a distinguished high school record, post-secondary education, or immersion in a world of literary models and mentors, Sexton took Richards up on his challenge and—to use the parlance of Edna St Vincent Millay—ended up putting chaos into fourteen lines.<sup>64</sup> As she states in the same letter from September 24, she “started to write, and it was a solitary act” (Sexton and

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<sup>64</sup> I refer here to Millay’s poem “I Will Put Chaos into Fourteen Lines”.

Ames 271). Between January and December 1957, Sexton would write sixty poems, all of which she showed to Orne. Thus it came to pass that, out of a “solitary” experiment with one of the oldest accentual-syllabic poetic forms, Sexton would discover a writing practice that relied heavily on set structures at its beginning while addressing questions of order and containment on a larger existential level.

What interests me as a practitioner of formal poetry is how the use of metre and form in Sexton’s work seems to emerge as an organic and *personal* instinctive reaction to emotional crises rather than as a careful exercise in following models and/or allying oneself with mentors living or dead (consider, for example, Bishop’s affinity for Wordsworth and Herbert). In a 1974 interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, conducted three-and-a-half months prior to her death, Sexton responded to the interviewer’s query regarding “the artistic necessity of concentrated effect” in her practice with the crisp reply, “I didn’t understand that; I just did it” (Gerald and Sexton 70). Part of the reasoning behind this response can be traced to the essential connection that Sexton made between the “language” that was mental illness and the language of the poet. In a letter to Anne Clarke, a friend and psychiatrist, Sexton laid out her revelation concerning the difference between the language of the mad and that of the outside world:

It is hard to define. When I was first sick I was thrilled to get into the Nut House. At first, of course, I was just scared and crying and very quiet (who me!) but then I found this girl (very crazy of course) (like me I guess) who talked language. What a relief! I mean, well...someone! And then, later, a while later, and quite a while I found out that [Dr.] Martin [Orne] talked

language ... And that's the story. By the way, Kayo has never once understood one word of language.

Linda does a little. (Sexton and Ames 244)

What is it exactly that defines this kind of language? In her 1983 article "Housewife into Poet: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton," Diane Wood Middlebrook offers up the following:

By "language," Sexton seems to mean forms of speech in which meaning is condensed and indirect and where breaks and gaps demand as much attention as what is voiced. Schizophrenics use language this way and so do poets: "figurative language" is the term Sexton might have used here, except she meant to indicate that the crucible of formation was urgent need. Being permitted to communicate in "language" made her feel "real" ... (486-487)

The use of form in Sexton's practice worked in unison with the authenticity of both of these languages, framing and offsetting authentic and revelatory content.

Whether embodied by the exacting standards of emotionally changeable parents, the draconian mechanisms of the mid-20th century mental health care machine, or the condescension of (predominantly male) poetry critics and peers,<sup>65</sup> the toils of imposed form and control had held Sexton fast her whole life; it is interesting to note that, as she found herself trapped and acted upon, she was also able to trap and act upon emotional

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<sup>65</sup> The most dramatic example of this was the reaction of James Dickey in the *New York Times Book Review* to *All My Pretty Ones*; of Sexton's second book, Dickey wrote, "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience, as if this made the writing more real, and it would also be difficult to find a more hopelessly mechanical approach to reporting those matters than the one she employs" (qtd. in Middlebrook, *ASB* 173).

impulses, words, and sounds. Using form allowed Sexton to approach and contemplate traumatic subjects and events, to plug into rhythms and patterns reminiscent of childhood, and to elevate ordinary observations and actions to the level of ritual or the supernatural (Lacey 98-100). In an interview with Patricia Marx published in *The Hudson Review*, Sexton spoke of how writing “[put] things back in place,” allowing her to “come into order again,” but also how “all form” functioned as “a trick to get to the truth” (Sexton and Marx 58). Control and shape, on a macro as well as a micro level, allowed Sexton to break free of certain limits, even while it tightened the grip of others. In her account of growing up in the Sexton home, the poet’s daughter Linda details her mother’s regimented writing schedule and production of “elaborate rhyme schemes,” even while she refused to conform to the genteel role of the Boston Chatelaine, tend house, or offer her children what would be considered stable, “normative” care (L.G. Sexton 36; 76). As Sexton found herself progressively unravelling prior to her death, her work, even in its most elastic and unpruned state, retained certain formal elements; these included the intermittent inclusion of roughly metrical rhythms, repetition, parallel structure, and anaphora. I share, in spite of myself, the opinion of Pollitt, who deems Sexton’s earlier (and more structurally ordered) works to be her finest, stating that her later poems were wanting, as they lacked “the use of structure and sound to delimit a drama, intensify emotion and clarify meaning” (70). However, Paul A. Lacey’s assessment of the structural shifts in Sexton’s praxis also carries water; writing in 1972, while the poet was still alive, Lacey points out that “a careful reading of [Sexton’s] four books of poetry reveals, not the



lack of form which the critics emphasize, but a continual preoccupation with both thematic and technical means for giving significant shape to her poetry” (96). In other words, as Sexton was perennially rooted in the domestic, so she never truly abandoned the idea of form and its saving power. The form-domestic binary both rooted Sexton in a solitary, contemplative practice and enabled her to emerge as a public being, reaching outwards not only in a “star” capacity but also as a model and support for others in distress.

This chapter will examine these issues by specifically focussing on two elements. First, it will look at how **familial care and control** factor into Sexton’s work and how they are reflected through the poet’s use of formal structures. Having experienced a fraught relationship with both her parents, Sexton often uses her poems to appeal to male figures (be they father, psychiatrist, or teacher), dwell on maternal intimacy or lack thereof (via the poet’s actual mother or beloved lost great-aunt Anna Ladd “Nana” Dingley),<sup>66</sup> or dramatize regression, repositioning the poet as a child in need of care. Secondly, I will examine how Sexton’s use of form reflects the **redefinition of domestic space**—here, I aim to specifically look at how the poet deconstructs “standard” domestic imagery and scenarios and, conversely, domesticates the world of the institution and the institution of madness itself. In my discussion of each of these two points, I emphasize

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<sup>66</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will be touching on, but not delving into, Sexton’s relationship with Nana. I would also like to acknowledge that, throughout the trajectory of Sexton’s career, these calls to be held and nurtured would eventually project outward to encompass the search for God and His divine absolution as well as the protection of figures such as the Virgin Mary.

the presence—and importance—of the performative in Sexton’s practice. Through it, she delivered the desperation of the poem-making impulse into public life, celebrating both the rawness and the vulnerability of the ego and the vitality of the female body. In conducting this analysis, I do not seek to reduce Sexton and the mechanics of her practice to self-destruction and/or the death-wish. Rather, I aim to present the formal elements in her work as being indicative of a mind making order on its own terms, representing crucial emotional and presentational texture.<sup>67</sup>

“What large children we are”: Form, Family, Care, and Control

Anne Sexton came to the craft and career of poetry as an adult; married with children, she functioned, if barely, as part of a post-war world that asserted the illusion of domination through the curation and maintenance of The American Home. In the mid-1950s, Sexton was, like most of her suburban sisters, at the mercy of male control, confined to a realm of glossy, modern convenience-enhanced interiors, and relegated to a routine of cleaning, childcare, meticulous personal grooming, and “suitable” recreational pursuits. Desperately awkward and insecure as a child and younger teenager, Sexton had now bloomed as a beauty and sensed opportunities opening up before her. She foresaw

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<sup>67</sup> Much of Sexton’s work, although it follows a metrical/formal template, is challenging to scan. In analyzing the poems in this chapter, I have tried to follow my ear as faithfully as possible, as well as take into consideration particularities of regional (New England) pronunciation that would have affected its being read aloud. In certain cases where the metre is hard to pin down and the division of feet is problematic (e.g. “One for My Dame”), I have indicated stresses and left out foot breaks. I have consistently marked caesurae, however, as I find Sexton’s use of them to be of particular interest.

her potential, like many of her peers, as a wife and mother but also as a dispenser of succour and potency to males (Middlebrook, *ASB* 42).<sup>68</sup> The larger prejudice of the times certainly had something to do with this distorted self-view; however, Sexton's illness, along with her childhood experiences with male figures, had also played a significant part. The presence of Sexton's father looms large in the poet's cosmology; it exerted its own influence on not only the poet's craft but also her relationship with male authority figures, psychiatrists, and teachers, who would unwittingly become surrogate "fathers." It might be argued that Sexton's early adherence to form, rather than emerging (as with Bishop) from past exposure to, and identification with, "male" poetic models and mentors, was born out of an internalized sense of deference to men; the joint proddings of Dr. Orne and (unwittingly) Dr. Richards of Harvard effectively *told her what to do*, thus setting her on a path whereby she would attempt to contain, order, and reprocess the trauma that had become a part of her life. In spite of this, Sexton's practice was to become her own as it strove to articulate female perspectives and experiences, even as the need for male approval and the urge to comfort and seduce lurked perennially beneath the surface of her methods. Looking at Sexton's father and how he enters into her poetry sheds much-needed light on the poet's relationship to the domestic and how she formally shapes anxieties around this.

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<sup>68</sup> During her first interview with Orne, Sexton professed that she felt her only viable talent would be prostitution—helping men to feel powerful (Middlebrook, *ASB* 42).

Ralph Churchill Harvey was a charismatic and fastidious man who worked in the wool trade. Harvey's own banker and businessman father had been stern and abstemious, privileging "moral" comportment and rejecting smoking and alcohol. Ralph, in keeping with the hedonistic spirit of the Jazz Age, displayed more of the tastes of a *bon vivant* while managing to harbour an inflexible streak that, unfortunately, found itself unleashed on his three daughters. He insisted that they conduct themselves on the *qui vive* (as he put it), adhering to impeccable standards for comportment and appearance; athletic and amiable Jane, his favourite, was up to the task, as was bookish and politically active Blanche. Anne, on the other hand, seemed primed to rebel and disappoint. Fidgety, loud, and clumsy, with a tendency to finger her professionally roller-set hair into snarls and appear in mismatched outfits, Anne was a colossal disappointment (Middlebrook, *ASB* 9). As his business weathered the vicissitudes of the Great Depression, Harvey's drinking escalated to problematic levels. He would hunker down in his room before emerging for dinner, invariably erupting in rage at the table; more often than not, it was Anne who was the target of his attacks.<sup>69</sup> Harvey would eventually stop drinking in 1950; however, his youngest daughter would never be able to rid herself of the memory of being lambasted for her table manners or her acne. And there were yet darker dimensions to Harvey's discourse. Using what Sexton's mother Mary Gray termed "nasty language," he began to

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<sup>69</sup> The theme of eating and dining rituals factor prominently in Sexton's work, and their importance is possibly rooted in these traumatic family mealtime experiences. Sexton would later recoil from eating with her own family, and mealtimes were predictably unpleasant affairs (Middlebrook, *ASB* 333-334).

probe Anne for information on what he sensed to be her sexual proclivities, a leaning towards “looseness.” More startling still were the confessions Sexton made in a trance state in therapy sessions with Orne in which she reported that she had been sexually abused by her father. Thus it was that Sexton found herself repeatedly betrayed and violated by the adults in her immediate circle, and this manifested itself in her preoccupation with appealing to, seeking comfort from, and assuaging men.<sup>70</sup>

This hydra-headed dynamic of control, alienation, rejection, and exploitation, compounded by real love and longing to please on Sexton’s part, finds a voice in the poet’s early work. On the topic of Ralph Harvey, Sexton’s initial tone reverberates with nostalgia and anguish. In “The Bells,”<sup>71</sup> the poet begins by using lines of deceptively even length and metre to appeal to her father, recalling a joint outing:

u / u / u / (u)  
Today | the cir | cus poster  
u / u / u / u /  
is scab | bing off | the con | crete wall  
u u / u / u / (u)  
and the child | ren have | forgotten  
(u)/ u / u /  
if | they knew | at all.  
/ u u / u / (u)  
Father, || | do you | remember? (1-5)

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<sup>70</sup> Sexton was also subjected to genital inspections on the part of her mother, Mary Gray Harvey, and alluded to Orne that there may have been a sexually abusive dynamic with her great aunt, Anna Ladd “Nana” Dingley (Middlebrook, *ASB* 57, 59).

<sup>71</sup> From *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 1960 (referred to hereinafter as *Bedlam*).

The next twenty-five lines roll out as steadily rhythmical free verse, musical with a faint iambic imprint and yet representative of the danger facing the acrobat described in the poem (“the flying man breast out / across the boarded sky”) and the headiness and uncertainty of the father’s love, even as he offers comfort in this one particular instance. When Sexton does envision domestic certainty concerning a father figure, it involves an exotic removal of location, the insertion of disturbing incestuous resonances—and the presence of death. In “The Moss of His Skin,”<sup>72</sup> the poet adopts the persona of a young Arab girl buried alive beside her father as a living sacrifice. The work follows a vaguely regular iambic/anapaestic dimetrical template, and an alternating (*abcb*) rhyme scheme conveys both lulling stability and a distressing sense of confinement:

u u / u u / (u)  
 It was on | ly important  
 u / u / /  
 to smile | and hold still,  
 u / u u / (u)  
 to lie | down beside him  
 u u / u /  
 and to rest | awhile,  
 u u / u u u / (u)  
 to be fol | ded up together  
 u / u u /  
 as if | we were silk,  
 u / u u / u / (u)  
 to sink | from the eyes | of mother  
 u / u /  
 and not | to talk.  
 u / / / (u)  
 The black | room took us

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<sup>72</sup> *Bedlam*.

u u / u u /  
like a cave | or a mouth  
u u / u / (u)  
or an in | door belly.  
u / u /  
I held | my breath  
u / u u /  
and dad | dy was there,  
u / u / /  
his thumbs, || | his fat skull,  
u / u / / (u)  
his teeth, || | his hair growing  
u u / u u /  
like a field | or a shawl.  
u / u u /  
I lay | by the moss  
u u / u /  
of his skin | until  
u / / u / (u)  
it grew strange. || | My sisters  
u u u / u u /  
will never know | that I fall  
u u u / u u /  
out of myself | and pretend  
u u / u u /  
that Allah | will not see  
u u / u / (u)  
how I hold | my daddy  
u u / / /  
like an old | stone tree.

Sexton's poem is unsettling on a number of levels; there is, to begin with, the use of the short line, which creates a claustrophobic visual and sonic column, setting up a struggle between the vitality and youth of the young speaker and her entrapment. Although there is liberal variation in the rising metre, the influence of the anapaest looms large, evoking the

lullaby tradition and/or that of the sentimental/performance-oriented works of the “poetesses” of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> Take, for example, this excerpt from Elizabeth Akers Allen’s “Rock Me to Sleep,” which uses a falling dactylic rhythm to deliver a sentimental but moving entreaty to be restored to innocence and security:

/    u    u    /    u    u    /    u    u    / (uu)  
 Backward, || turn | backward, || O | Time in your | flight,  
 /    u u    /    u u    /    u u    / (uu)  
 Make me a | child again | just for to | night!  
 /    u    u    /    u    u    / u u    / (uu)  
 Mother, || come | back from the | echoless | shore,  
 /    u u    /    u u    /    u u    / (uu)  
 Take me a | gain to your | heart as of | yore;  
 /    u u    /    u u    /    u u    / (uu)  
 Kiss from my | forehead the | furrows of | care,  
 /    u    \    / u    \    / u u    / (uu)  
 Smooth the few | silver threads | out of my | hair;  
 / u u    / u u    / u    \    / (uu)  
 Over my | slumbers your | loving watch | keep; —  
 /    u u    /    u u    /    u u    / (uu)  
 Rock me to | sleep, || mother, — || rock me to | sleep! (1-8)

In Sexton’s poem, variations involving the spondee and the bacchius (e.g. “and **hold still**”; “**room took**”; “his **fat skull**”; “**stone tree**”) puncture the triple-metre swing, and carry intimations of command and brutality whilst incidences of fourth paeons (e.g. “-ed up **together**”; “will never **know**”; “out of **myself**”) allow the lines to shiver with incredulity and helplessness. The poem’s victim, removed “from the eyes of mother” and condemned to silent acquiescence, expresses herself as someone trapped in a limbo

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<sup>73</sup>See my mention of the poetesses on page 17 of the Introduction to this dissertation.



between damnation and the headiness of the special intimacy of a new domestic environment, a *ménage à deux*. The sonic pattern is one of alternating half-rhymes, suggesting either a queasy uncertainty on the part of the girl speaker, the misfitting of childhood expectations and adult behaviours, and/or the warping of the logic of intimacy in misogynistic practices (ancient and otherwise).

In “And One for My Dame,”<sup>74</sup> Sexton sets up another visual and sonic pattern that shows the spatial and emotional removal from the intimacy of a lost father. Taking its name from the popular nursery rhyme “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep,” organized into heterometric tercets, and using an accentual sonic pattern appropriate to that folk form, mellowed by the inclusion of colloquial diction, the poem introduces us to the speaker’s father as capable self-made provider with a knack for communication and commerce:

u / / \  
A born salesman,  
u / u u / u /  
my father made all his dough  
u / u / u / u / u u /uu  
by selling wool to Fieldcrest, || Woolrich and Faribo.

u / / u  
A born talker,  
u u / u / u / / /  
he could sell one hundred wet-down bales  
u u / / u u / u / u u /  
of that white stuff. || He could clock the miles and the sales

u / u /  
and make it pay.

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<sup>74</sup> From *Live or Die*, 1966 (referred to hereinafter as *LD*).

u / u / u / u /u  
At home each sentence he would utter  
u / \ u /u u / u / u /u  
had first pleased the buyer who'd paid him off in butter. (1-9)

There is a sense of solidity and reassurance concerning the subject of the poem; we can sense this through the full rhymes in each stanza's final two lines. However, the fact that the last line of each stanza goes beyond the length of the two which precede it registers as a *symbolic* extension of some kind; near the beginning of the poem, this can be seen as mirroring the extraordinary achievements of the idolized father—his clients, his charm, his ability to feed a family well. As in “The Bells” and “The Moss of His Skin,” there is a palpable longing on the part of the daughter who, self-described as “gauche” (17), laments her failings while receiving her idol's successes with “funny teenage applause” (18). However, as the poem progresses, these ambitious final lines shift in meaning and tone and give the reader/listener some sense of the adult speaker's coming to awareness about her relationship with the father. Here is a man who, despite his ability to provide material security, is destined to push others away and rupture the domestic idyll by way of escape, either through dark appetites or dreams of physical relocation:

/ / u /  
Each night at home  
u /u u u / u /  
my father was in love with maps  
u u /uu / u /u u /u u /  
while the radio fought its battles with Nazis and Japs.

u / u u /  
Except when he hid  
u u / u u u / / /  
in his bedroom on a three-day drunk,  
u / u / u u/u u u / u /  
he typed out complex itineraries, packed his trunk,  
  
u / / u  
his matched luggage  
u /u u u u / u u /u  
and pocketed a confirmed reservation,  
u / u / u /u u / / u u / u  
his heart already pushing over the red routes of the nation. (19-27)

The speaker looking back on these abandonments is, like many mid-century American suburban women, tied to the house with “no place to go” (29); truly a victim of containment culture, the speaker conjures not only her father’s imagined and real progress “over the red routes of the nation” but also the fatal path of these urgings into the body itself. A landscape dotted with “routes like small veins, capitals like small stones” (33), and “cemeteries” (32) will eventually claim the poem’s subject:

u / / u / u /  
his heart pushed from neck to back,  
u / /u /u u u u / u u u /u u  
his white hanky signaling from the window of the Cadillac. (35-36)

Having met his end in a vehicle that is, effectively, the symbol of mid-century prosperity, the first father is replaced by a surrogate, similarly described in iconographic 1950s terms (“as blue-eyed as a picture book” [38]). It is at this point that the voice abruptly changes to the second person, as the speaker, using a spondaic staccato refrain from the old

nursery rhyme, situates the husband/father replacement in a similar role of provider-protector. The tone is one of ironized optimism, and the lines seem to be more closely aligned in length than they once were, perhaps conjuring a renewed sense of domestic harmony for the speaker—or (more likely), the fitting of the husband/father replacement into a patriarchally-ordained social/professional template:<sup>75</sup>

u / u / / u / u  
And when you drive off, || my darling,  
/ / / / u / u u /  
Yes, || sir! || Yes, || sir! || It's one for my dame,  
u / u / u / u \ u / u /  
your sample cases branded with my father's name, (43-45)

But security and calm are not what ultimately emerge in “And One for My Dame.” The final stanza allows the last line to drive off once again, shifting the mood back towards inaccessibility and panic:

u u/uuu /u  
your itinerary open,  
u / /u u /u  
its tolls ticking and greedy,  
u / u / / u / / / u /u  
its highways built up like new loves, || raw and speedy. (46-48)

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<sup>75</sup> Following her awaking in tears from a trance at the end of a 1962 therapy session, Sexton told Orne, “The feeling is so violent — I wanted to cry like this when my mother was dying, and I couldn’t... My father used to go on trips, just like Kayo. I was brought up on this same cycle; Kayo calls on the same customers as my father did. Kayo is now where my father used to go” (Middlebrook, *ASB* 166).

The road carries with it insatiable appetites, betrayal, and disaster. The jarring succession of monosyllables in the final line (punctuated by the molossus “**new loves, raw**”) and the screeching assonance in “greedy” and “speedy” amplify this. Spare and crystalline, “And One for My Dame” shows Sexton’s mounting anxiety regarding both abandonment by male figures and her rootedness to a pre-destined suburban home space, the haunting fate of being left behind.<sup>76</sup>

A similar interplay of confinement, longing, and transference occurs in “You, Doctor Martin.”<sup>77</sup> Addressed to Dr. Orne, the poem is made up of six seven-line stanzas varying between three and five feet in length and using an *abcabca* rhyme scheme. As with “The Moss of His Skin,” the metre is rising<sup>78</sup> but mixed, relying mainly on iambs, anapaests, and liberal variations. Immediately, the reader perceives a struggle taking place between the speaker-patient and the father-doctor, within both the confines of the hospital and that of the poem-space:

(u) /    u u    /    u        /  
 You, || Doctor Mar | tin, || walk  
 u        /        u u    /        u        /        / (u)  
 from break | fast to mad | ness. || Late August  
 u /        u        u /        u /        u / (u)  
 I speed | through the ant | isep | tic tunnel

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<sup>76</sup> In an earlier session with Orne, Sexton had spoken at length about her dread of being left at home without Kayo when he travelled for business, stating how it “remove[d] all reason for a day to begin or end” rendering her “rudderless with no direction” (*ASB* 36).

<sup>77</sup> *Bedlam*.

<sup>78</sup> i.e. moving from an unstressed syllable to a stressed syllable.

u u / u / \ /  
 where the mov | ing dead | still talk  
 u / u u / u / u /  
 of push | ing their bones | against | the thrust  
 u / u / u / u u / u u /  
 of cure. || And I | am queen | of this sum | mer hotel  
 u u / u / u u /  
 or the laugh | ing bee | on a stalk (1-7)

The use of caesurae, along with the continuous flow of the enjambed lines, creates a sense of misfitting between mandated pattern and spontaneous discourse. The speaker finds herself literally ricocheting off the walls of the form, calling out to the idolized doctor, even as she elevates herself to the role of “queen” of a “summer hotel” or a defiant “laughing bee on a stalk.”<sup>79</sup> The consistent sonic links with “breakfast,” “madness,” “August,” “against,” and “thrust” create a holistic sense of unity in these seven lines; however, Sexton’s speaker is not done—she allows her discourse to push forward into the following stanza:

u / u / u /(u)  
 of death. || We stand | in broken  
 (u) / u / u / u /  
 lines | and wait | while they | unlock  
 u / u / u \ u / u /  
 the doors | and count | us at | the froz | en gates  
 u / u u / u \ u / (u)  
 of din | ner. || The shib | boleth | is spoken  
 u u / u / u \ u /  
 and we move | to grav | y in | our smock

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<sup>79</sup> In many of her poems, Sexton, like Sylvia Plath, uses bee imagery to convey a sense of inner disorder.

u / u / u / u /  
of smiles. || We chew | in rows, || our plates  
(u) / u / u /  
scratch | and whine | like chalk  
  
u /  
In school || ... (8-15)

The “queen,” the “laughing bee,” is, in fact, an inmate in a death-haunted purgatory that refuses all order; the patients position themselves in “broken / lines,” even as they are forced to “chew in rows.” The sensation of misalignment and disconnect is evident here; there is one “smock / of smiles” for the collective mass of ill individuals, and it is the plates, rather than the utensils in the hands of the suffering that “scratch and whine.” Throughout it all, consonance involving the hard /k/ sound in “broken,” “unlock,” “spoken,” “smock,” and “chalk” strikes the ear as alarming and dissonant. The quiet freneticism builds in the next stanza:

\ / / /  
... There are | no knives  
  
u / u u / u /  
for cut | ting your throat. || I make  
/ u u / / u u / u /  
mocca | sins all morn | ing. || At first | my hands  
u / u u / u \ u /  
kept em | pty, || unrav | eled for | the lives  
u / u / / u / u /  
they used | to work. || Now I learn | to take  
u / / / u / u \ u /  
them back, || each an | gry fin | ger that | demands  
u / u u / u u /  
I mend | what anoth | er will break

u / u  
 tomor | row. || ... (15-22)

There is something of a sense of authority at work here, as shown by the numerous declarations of action (“I make”; “I learn,” “I mend”). However, there is also the looming spectre of the act of suicide, and this is countered by the patriarchal forces that stand to oppose it, heralded sonically by the jarring presence of three spondees (“**There are**”; “**no knives**”; “**each an-**”), one bacchius (“-sins **all morn-**”), and one cretic (“**now I learn**”). On top of this, the stanza is accorded a staggered rhythm and chain of thought by a caesura in each line but the last. The antidote—if there is one—is suggested in the presence of the doctor:

u / u / (u)  
 ... Of course, || I love you;  
 u / u / u / u /  
 you lean | above | the pla | stic sky,  
 / u u / / u / u / (u)  
 god of | our block, || prince of all | the foxes.  
 u / u / u /  
 The break | ing crowns | are new  
 u / / \ / /  
 that Jack | wore. || Your | third eye  
 (u) / u / u u / u / u u / (u)  
 moves | among | us and lights | the sep | arate boxes  
 u u / u /  
 where we sleep | or cry. (22-28)

The doctor-figure is given almost mythological significance here; transformed into a deity and a fairy tale figure (“prince of all the foxes,” a phrase which hums with sly sexual



overtone), he is the object of the speaker’s professed love, whether through transference or through a sense of deference which the code of the institution demands. There is an overtone of inescapable authority that hovers over the ward as the doctor moves through it. Made holy and all-seeing through the presence of the “third eye,” he is granted an impression of further significance through the sonic “tricks” of assonance involving the rounded “o” sound ( /ɔ/: “god,” “block,” “foxes,” “boxes”), more hard /k/ sounds, variations including a trochee (“**god** of”), a cretic (“**prince of all**”), and the pairing of a half-spondee and a spondee (“**wore. Your third eye**”). Moving into the last two lines of the stanza (27 and 28), the reader/listener is returned to a softer-seeming pattern of iambs and anapaests, which, rather than giving the impression of restored regularity, conveys a sense of alienation (those stricken souls in their “separate boxes”) and vulnerability. As there is a contrast between the “terrible energy” of the speaker-patient and the confines of the ward and the poetic voice and the form, so there is a poignant disconnect drawn between the infantilized patients and the doctor/surrogate father. In spite of this divide, Sexton’s patient-speaker asserts a sense of assumed power as she envisions herself ascending to a place where she might be deserving of, if not intimacy, then a reckoning with the doctor-father figure:

(u) /     /     /     u u /  
 What | large child | ren we are  
 u     u / u u /     / /  
 here. || All ov | er I grow | most tall  
 u u     /     /     u /     u u /(u)  
 in the | best ward. || | Your bus | iness is people,

u / u u / \ u u /(uu)  
you call | at the | madhouse, || | an oracular  
/ u u / / u u /  
eye in | our nest. || | Out in | the hall  
u / u u / u u u / u u /  
the in | tercom pa | ges you. || You twist | in the pull  
u u / u / u u /  
of the fox | y chil | dren who fall (29-35)

The “children” whom we previously saw sleeping and weeping in their “separate boxes” are now “large,” including the speaker who proclaims that she has grown “most tall” in the “best ward”. Here, the emphasis of the spondaic variations (“**large child**”; “**most tall**”; “**best ward**”) points not to the “oracular” beneficent doctor but to the physical size and directed desires of the patients, namely the speaker herself. The doctor figure here, unlike Sexton’s real father, deals in the assessment of human suffering, talk and prognoses (“Your business is people”). However, as with the latter, there is a tussle for acceptance and ownership; this is a man she cannot have, one who must divide his attention between the patients and external forces (“Out in the hall / the intercom pages you”), literally physically resisting (“you twist in the pull”) the entreaties of his charges. A fourth paeon in Line 34, ruptured by a medial feminine caesurae (“-ges. you. You **twist**”), transmits the frustration to the reader’s ear. The effect is one where the doctor is reduced to a spectral symbol of control that can be appealed to and loved but never possessed. Sexton would revisit the image of tallness, of “large children” who are, despite

their physical size, unable to configure themselves to be accepted or loved entirely by a father figure, in her longer free-verse poem “The Death of the Fathers”:<sup>80</sup>

We were conspirators,  
secret actors,  
and I kissed you  
because I was tall enough.  
but that is over.  
The era closes  
and large children hang their stockings  
and build a black memorial to you.  
And you, you fade out of sight  
like a lost signalman  
wagging his lantern  
for the train that comes no more.

(“4. Santa” 43-54)

This sense of awkwardness and misfitting continues into the final stanza of “You, Dr. Martin,” which acknowledges the speaker’s inability to appeal to or possess the doctor-father figure. However, something crucial to the speaker’s survival has taken its place:

u / u / u /  
like floods | of life | in frost.  
u / u / u \ u /  
and we | are mag | ic talk | ing to | itself,  
/ u u u / u u / u / u /  
noisy | and alone. || I am queen | of all | my sins  
u / u u / / /  
forgot | ten. || Am I | still lost?  
(u) / u u / u u / u / u /  
Once | I was beaut | iful. || Now | I am | myself,

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<sup>80</sup> Originally published in *The Book of Folly*, 1972.

(u) / u / / u / / u / (u u)  
count | ing this row | and that row | of moccasins  
(u) / u \ u / u /  
wait | ing on | the si | lent shelf. (36-42)

Again, in Line 38, the speaker declares herself to be a queen; however, here, she turns inward to claim her rule over “sins / forgotten,” implying both an ownership of psychic failing and a sense that she has found a kind of absolution in the ward. In a world where to be mad is to be “lost,” the speaker questions her estimation in male eyes. She looks backward to muse on her vanished beauty which, along with sanity and the gestures of domestic conformity, anchored her firmly in the realm of Cold War “containment” culture. But now, in this most unlikely of places, the speaker has come into something approaching self-actualization. She has pitted her own form-making against that of the institution and the “fathers” who run it; the act of making and shaping poetry is, she tells us with an unwavering iambic lilt, “magic talking to itself.” In this act lies a reclamation of identity (“Now I am myself”). The penultimate line of the final stanza, with its two attention-directing consecutive bacchii (“(-ing **this row** and **that row**”), shows us that she also has the power to count, to order, to rewrite her own narrative. In making a poem about the misfitting of women and the mentally ill and the misalignment of attention towards male authority (“father”) figures, Sexton manages to show herself bypassing established order and instead, to paraphrase Maxine Kumin, pounding her reality into

form.<sup>81</sup> Heraldng the image of the witch that would haunt Sexton’s subsequent work, the poet casts herself as someone who lies beyond traditional male approval—extra-domestic, shunned, mocked, and yet able to remake the idea of order in her own way.

Sexton’s relationship with her mother was as problematic as that with her father, but its complications had their own unique character, one that was inextricably tied to female identity and a sense of psychic “twinning.” Mary Gray Harvey was, by all accounts, a model of charm and vivacity. Well-educated—she attended both boarding school and Wellesley College—and effortlessly at ease in the social milieux of both town (Newton/Weston) and country (Squirrel Island, Maine), she enjoyed an almost conspiratorial closeness with Ralph; together, near the end of the jazz era, they would throw extravagant parties, often with themes, costumes, and games. As convivial as Mary Gray may have been in the company of her husband and social circle, Anne and her sisters felt themselves kept at a distance with regard to their mother’s love, competing for attention by, for example, leaving drawings and notes under her pillow. As Sexton grew to adulthood, her need for Mary Gray’s approval manifested itself in a toxic dynamic of rivalry and powerlessness, causing the younger woman to note in her diary, whether through admiration or horror, “Such attraction, dependence.” Sandy Robart, a close friend of Sexton’s, noted how the poet “dropped ten years or more in her mother’s presence. She was overwhelmed—she was awed. I think it was probably an attempt to please. I can see

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<sup>81</sup> “I seem to remember that I often helplessly suggested, ‘why don’t you pound it into form?’ and often it worked” (Kumin 236).

her standing at the phone in the kitchen, talking to her mother, and feeling that Anne had turned into a little girl” (Middlebrook, *ASB* 37; 46-47; 30)

As with Ralph, there were also disturbing psychosexual elements to the relationship, albeit ones springing from perceived notions of cleanliness and physical “correctness.” In addition to being required to report to her mother about bowel movements, Anne, as a young child, was made to lie on the bathroom floor and have her mother inspect her vulva; in the most serious of tones, Mary Gray told her daughter how “we had to keep it clean and mustn’t touch.” There is no doubt that Sexton’s sense of physical and emotional agency was subjected to the incursions of adult manipulation and impropriety (Middlebrook, *ASB* 59). Young Anne was drawn into her mother’s world in a way which created a binary—a “twinning,” to use Sexton’s own words—that was comparative, competitive, critical, and aspirational.

This “twinning” extended itself to the realm of the mind and language, for Anne’s mother showed a face to the world that was both bookish and urbane. On meeting Mary Gray, an early boyfriend of Anne’s described her as “something of an intellectual” and possessed of “a tweedy Wellesley air.” Mary Gray may have never followed in the footsteps of her newspaperman father or published widely, as her youngest daughter would one day do. However, based on her elegant handwriting, the skits and occasional poems she whipped up for family summer performances, the fact that she consumed a book a day, and the eloquent and witty letters she wrote Ralph whenever he was away on business, she had come to be lionized in the Harvey home as the living example of

decorous female intelligence. Anne, even as an adult, would inwardly seethe when her father would wax eloquent on his wife's superiority. "None of you girls are as brilliant as your mother," he once said, "You are creative but she is brilliant." Thus it was that the dynamic Sexton shared with her mother was one of pained striving versus golden achievement, chaos versus refinement, disorder versus order. It may have indeed come to pass that her career as a poet would have started earlier in earnest had it not been for a current of suspicion that had awoken in Mary Gray when Sexton had her "Cinquains" published in the school yearbook. Her curiosity led her to take the extraordinary step of sending a collection of Sexton's juvenile work to a professor contact in New York City. The poems indeed passed the originality test, but Sexton was understandably mortified; she wrote nothing for the next ten years. "Somewhere I stopped, I stopped imagining," she told Orne. "Now I've lost all this time." It would be extreme to name Mary Gray's intervention as being the sole cause of this cessation of creative output, but Sexton saw Mary Gray's actions and influence as instrumental in her sudden lack of confidence. Paradoxically, the reality of the situation was that Sexton, through her being locked in a dynamic of fevered admiration and rivalry with her own mother, found herself spurred ever onward. Mary Gray, the object of a "twinship" that was laced through with threads of love and hate, was utterly necessary to both Sexton's development as a working poet and her awareness of her own position—and trials—as a mother (Middlebrook, *ASB* 18-21, 48-49).

Complicating the rapport was the fact that Mary Gray would die relatively young (aged 58) of cancer. The combination of grief, resentment, inadequacy, and love that Sexton felt saw itself expressed in several longer pieces, including “The Division of Parts”;<sup>82</sup> here, the poet takes on, over the course of four distinct sections/episodes, and in measured and somewhat distanced tones, the question of inheritances both material and psychological. The poet begins with the coldest logistics first:

/ u u / u /  
 Mother, || my Ma | ry Gray,  
 u / u / u / (u)  
 once res | ident | of Gloucester  
 u / u / (u)  
 and Es | sex County,  
 u / uu \ u /  
 a phot | ostat of | your will  
 u / uu / u /  
 arrived | in the mail | today.  
 / u u u/ u u / (u)  
 This is | the divis | ion of money.  
 / u \ /  
 I am | one third  
 u u / u / uu / (u)  
 of your daugh | ters count | ing my bounty  
 u / uu / u /  
 or I | am a queen | alone  
 uu / u /  
 in the par | lor still,  
 / u u / u / (u)  
 eating | the bread | and honey.  
 / u / / (u)  
 It is | Good Friday.  
 (u)/ / / uu / u /  
 Black | birds pick | at my win | dow sill. (1: 1-13)

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<sup>82</sup> *Bedlam*.



The metre in these initial stanzas is rising and gently rhythmic; the straightforwardness of the voice is carried by this, as well as by relative absence (save for in the first line) of interruptions in breath and thought conveyed by caesurae. And yet there is a feel of cyclical preoccupation on the part of the speaker. In addition to the end rhymes, there are internal rhymes (e.g. “of your daughters **counting** my **bounty**”; “photostat of your **will** / arrived in the **mail** today”) and incidences of assonance and alliteration (“**black birds pick** at my **windowsill**”). Sexton would refer to these in-line tricks collectively as “clang”—that which seizes the reader’s attention as they move through the work (Middlebrook, *ASB* 180). Sexton identifies herself as part of a trinity (“I am one third / of your daughters...”) and yet, as in “You, Doctor Martin,” sets herself apart as a “queen,” an elevated incarnation of the witch figure who is separated from the realm of family love and engagement, her ostracization and remove symbolized by the “black birds” that not only wait at the window but also threaten to broach it, as well as the fact that this is Good Friday, a day of reckoning with both death and penance. As the poem moves on, the speaker considers both the weight of the material accumulations of a life lost (“bright stones”; “gaudy fur animals”; “family silver”) and the inherited double sadness of having replicated the “ideal” life of a mid-century wife and mother while being marred by mothering that is deemed slippery, evasive, and critical:

u / u / u / u /  
Since then | I have | preten | ded ease,  
/ u u / u\ u / u / u /  
loved with | the trick | eries | of need, || but not | enough

u / u / u \  
to shed | my daught | erhood  
u / u u / u /  
or sweet | en him as | a man.  
u / u / u / u / (u)  
I drink | the five | o' clock | martinis  
u / u u / / u u /  
and poke | at this | dry page | like a rough  
/ / u / u \  
goat. || Fool! || I fum | ble my | lost childhood  
u u / u u / u / /  
for a moth | er and lounge | in sad stuff  
u / u / u / u / /  
with love | to catch | and catch | as catch can. (3: 1-9)

The narrative here is one of pretending and tricks, of falling short, both as a child and a functioning adult—including as an adult writer. As with the first four-stanza section of the poem, there are lines that are mismatched in terms of length as well as an increasing number of caesurae. Compounding this are the Sextonian incidences of “clang”—internal repetition and sound play—but also “slips” that challenge grammatical and syntactical logic. “Sweeten” whom “as a man”? Are we speaking of a husband or a father? This lack of an antecedent can be read as implying the lack of roots and comfort that characterize the “lost childhood” of which Sexton speaks.<sup>83</sup> And then there is the curious triple occurrence of the word “catch” in Line 9, ringing out as conceptually surreal and

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<sup>83</sup> I give credit for this provocative observation to Dr. Donaldson.

sonically arresting.<sup>84</sup> What is certain is that this word sounds like “witch,” and it is entirely possible that the poet wished to whisper that association, that owned identity that conveys both exile and liberating power. It is true that the speaker “loung[e]s in sad stuff,” but the incantatory strangeness of the stanza’s last two lines—including the stomp of two final bacchii (“in **sad stuff**”; “as **catch can**”) underlies how that the speaker is making a move to assert control of the self.

In the fourth and final section of the work, we see Sexton assuming the transformative potential of words—what she herself termed “word magic” (Ossip 11)—to reanimate and reckon with both her grief and her mother’s image:

(u) / u / u /  
 Now | it's Fri | day's noon  
 u / u / /  
 and I | would still curse  
 u \ u / u /  
 you with | my rhym | ing words  
 u / u / u / / /  
 and bring | you flap | ping back, || | old love,  
 / / u / u / u u /  
 old cir | cus knit | ting, || | god-| in-her-moon,  
 u / u \ u / / /  
 all fair | est in | my lang | syne verse,  
 u / u / u / u / (u)  
 the gau | zy bride | among | the children, (4: 17-23)

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<sup>84</sup> In “The Double Image”, Sexton uses this verb (in a similar grammatically oblique manner) to describe her reaching towards her mother for love and approval: “...And this is how I came/ to catch at her; and this is how I lost her” (2: 10-11).

The unreachable mother is cursed by the speaker but is still accorded, in metaphorical and surrealistic language, the kind of divine/mythological allure that was applied to Dr. Orne in “You, Dr. Martin (“god of our block, prince of all the foxes”). Like the poem’s Orne, she is an omnipresent surveillant, but one who is ethereal, a creature of lore. The metre, with its stream of (mainly) iambs, conveys a lyrical unreality, which, conversely, is punctuated by a series of spondees (“**old love**”; “**old cir-**”; “**syne verse**”) and a bacchius (“**would still curse**”). The child Sexton seems to be stamping her feet in consternation, even as the memory of the idol-mother swirls above and beyond her in death. However, the following stanza—the penultimate one in the poem—presents the mother figure in a gentler and more benevolent light:

u / u u / u u /  
the fan | cy amid | the absurd  
u / u u / u /  
and awk | ward, || that horn | for hounds  
u / u / u \ u / (u)  
that skip | per home | ward, || that | museum  
/ u u / / u u /  
keeper | of stiff star | fish, || that blaze  
u / u / u / (u)  
within | the pil | grim woman,  
u / / u u /  
a clown mend | er, || a dove’s  
(u)/ u / u /  
cheek | among | the stones,  
u / u \ / /  
my La | dy of | first words,  
/ u u u / u u /  
this is | the divi | sion of ways. (4: 24-32)

Here, Mary Gray is no longer only a vaporous spirit or a watcher in the moon but also, through another series of daring metaphors, a guide, a human repository of family lore and home-grown New England stoicism (“that museum / keeper of stiff starfish, that blaze / within the pilgrim woman”). In addition to this, she is a “a clown mender,” a fixer of lost souls and a bringer of peace (“a dove’s / cheek among the stones”). In terms of metrical variation, there is bacchic emphasis (on “**stiff star-**” and “a **clown men-**”), suggestive perhaps of the mother’s intermittently perceivable resolve and initial trochaic variants in Lines 27 and 32 that snap the reader/listener back to attention. Mary Gray is emblematic of the aforementioned resolve, but so is the speaker. It has not been lost on Sexton that Mary Gray, for all her competitiveness and emotional changeability, is the giver of language. In recognizing her mother as the “Lady of first words,” Sexton is able to divine her own existence in relation to her mother—she who was seen as “brilliant” and, here, “first”—and propose that this is the moment where she can at least *begin* to attempt actualizing herself as a whole, autonomous creative being.

This process would, of course, never be easy for Sexton. Mary Gray would remain in her consciousness as both a benchmark and an unremovable thorn, and their relationship would lead the poet to question her own role and validity as a functional mother. It is here that we come to Sexton’s arguably most celebrated poem on the topic of motherhood, “The Double Image”<sup>85</sup> (significantly inspired by W.D. Snodgrass’s *Heart’s*

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<sup>85</sup> *Bedlam*.

*Needle*).<sup>86</sup> Rawly autobiographical, the piece does the heavy lifting of exploring these different relationships, using a variety of stanza patterns divided between seven discrete sections. Within each stanza pattern, there are modulations in line length and rhyme scheme, although the impulse to reach out and establish kinships through the latter is particularly consistent and compelling. The poem directly addresses Sexton's youngest child, Joyce, from whom she had been separated due to her illness and ensuing hospitalization, expressing the conflict between a yearning for enduring unconditional love and the pull towards the destructive otherness of madness (Johnson 86).<sup>87</sup> In the second section, four seven-line stanzas use form in decisive but challenged ways: the metre is iambic with variations, the line length moves from dimeter all the way to hexameter, and the rhyme patterns shift, defying aural and cognitive expectations. Nothing is to be relied upon, as these twenty-eight lines set out the speaker's movement back from the institution towards the child via a toxic way station—the seat of the speaker's own childhood. In the first of the stanzas, we see the subject of the poem, relocated to her mother's home and relegated to the infantilization and power struggles of old as supernatural forces look on:

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<sup>86</sup> Snodgrass's poem details the breakdown of his marriage and separation from his toddler daughter. Sexton's encounter with the poem in an anthology impacted her significantly and led her to establish a correspondence with Snodgrass (Middlebrook, *ASB* 76-78; Sexton, *SPL* 34-35).

<sup>87</sup> The separation between Joyce Sexton and her mother lasted from July 1956, when she was sent to live with Kayo's mother Billie Sexton, until her return home in November 1958 (Middlebrook, *ASB* 85).

u / u / u u /  
 They sent | me let | ters with news  
 u / u / u / u \ u / u / u /  
 of you | and I | made moc | casins | that I | would nev | er use.  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 When I | grew well | enough | to tol | erate  
 u / u / u u / u / /  
 myself, || I lived | with my moth | er. || Too late,  
 / / u / u u / u u / u /  
 too late, || | to live | with your moth | er, || the witch | es said.  
 u / u u / u / u / (u)  
 But I | didn't leave. || I had | my portrait  
 (u) / u /  
 done | instead. (2: 1-7)

The rhyme scheme here is *aabbcbc*; the rhymes are full, and there are no “orphan” (true unrhymed) endings; this, coupled with the repetition of “too late,” lends a feeling of creeping inevitability to the proceedings, in spite of the variation in line length and the scattering of caesurae.<sup>88</sup> The creation of the portrait has rooted the speaker in both home and the standards of female behaviour and appearance it represents. In the second stanza, we are presented with the home as a site of rejection and traumatizing accusation:

(u) / / / u / (u)  
 Part | way back | from Bedlam  
 u / u u / u / u / (u)  
 I came | to my moth | er's house | in Gloucester,  
 (u) / u / u u / u / u /  
 Mas | sachu | setts. || And this | is how | I came  
 u / u \ u / u / u / (u)  
 to catch | at her; || and this | is how | I lost her.

<sup>88</sup> In New England pronunciation, “portrait” lies somewhere between **pɔːr·treɪt** and **pɔːr·trət** but leans slightly closer to the former.

u / u u / u / u \ u / u /  
I can | not forgive | your su | icide , || my moth | er said.  
u u / u / u / u / (u)  
And she nev | er could. || | She had | my portrait  
(u)/ u /  
done | instead. (2: 8-14)

There is ceremony and musicality applied to the narrative, heard through the lilt of the iambs and anapaests, along with the repetition of “and this is how.” However, the stanza vibrates with frustration and alienation; the phrasing describing the subject’s reaching for love (“catch at her”) rings awkward, especially when followed by the mother’s baldly unambiguous placing of blame on the subject’s shoulders for an act which goes beyond being a suicide attempt or impulse and is instead presented (“your suicide”) as a *fait accompli*. The rhyme scheme mirrors this distancing, as it has shifted to *ababcdc*, driving distance between potential couplets; there is also the inclusion of compound rhyme (“Gloucester” and “lost her”), which creates an effect of visual disconnect. Finally, the word “portrait” looms in the stanza as an orphaned end word—an entity separate from the pattern, as the portrait itself is separate from the human poet and daughter. The painted image exists only to recreate her according to the implacable mother’s exacting standards: beautiful, whole, and *well*. The myth of the remade daughter who mirrors the image of the mother continues in the next stanza:

u / u u / u /  
I lived | like an an | gry guest,  
u u / u / u / u / / /  
like a part | ly mend | ed thing, || | an out | grown child.



u u / u u / u / u /  
 I remem | ber my moth | er did | her best.  
 u / u u / u u / u / u /  
 She took | me to Bos | ton and had | my hair | restyled.  
 u / u / u / u u / u /  
 Your smile | is like | your moth | er's, || the art | ist said.  
 u / u / u / u / u / (u)  
 I did | n't seem | to care. || I had | my portrait  
 (u)/ u /  
 done | instead. (2: 15-21)

Again, the “partly-mended” daughter experiences disconnect from the mother, despite the latter’s best intentions; the rhyme scheme *ababcdc* is repeated, placing distance between the rhymes and (by metaphoric extension) the two women. Again, “portrait” is left without a rhyming match and therefore isolated as an object to contain the uncontainable speaker, who has been “restyled” and identified as one whose “smile is like [her] mother’s.” In the last stanza of this section, there is a startling reversion to the form and tone of the first of these four stanzas:

/ u u / u / \ /  
 There was | a church | where I | grew up  
 u u / / u \ u / u /  
 with its | white cup | boards where | they locked | us up,  
 (u)/ u / u / u \ u / (u)  
 row | by row , || like pur | itans | or shipmates  
 / u u / u u / u / u /  
 singing | togeth | er. || My fath | er passed | the plate.  
 / / u / u / u \ u / u /  
 Too late | to be | forgiv | en now, || the witch | es said.  
 u / u u / u u / u u / u / (u)  
 I was | n't exact | ly forgiv | en. || They had | my portrait  
 (u)/ u /  
 done | instead. (2: 22-28)

The rhyme scheme of the first stanza (*aabbcb*) has reasserted itself but with a difference. The first four lines are indeed couplets, but ones whose endings mirror an inability to fit and/or co-exist. Lines 22 and 23 use lexical repetition in lieu of true rhyme, while Lines 24 and 25, albeit linked by light rhyme, transmit a dissonance through the first stressed syllable and the plural ending on “shipmates.” All is not well in this presented environment; the church with its “white cupboards” echoes the “separate boxes” that housed misery in “You. Dr. Martin”, framing it as a variation of the asylum. Again, as with the first stanza of the section, the witches—embodiments of both external and internal deviant forces—issue their judgment. The speaker can escape neither the role of the outsider-daughter nor the perpetuation of the “mirror image” of the mother as embodied by the portrait.

In speculating on Sexton’s handling of rhyme as a complement to her early use of metre, line length, stanzas, and word music, there are two interesting angles I would like to consider. One is the incantatory power of rhyme that plugs into folk-based beliefs and thus, by extension, into the outward-looking supernatural cosmology Sexton created around the woman as witch. Reginald Gibbons points out that rhyme enhances poetic language, not merely in the way that it adds aesthetic flourish and authority but in the way that it “thinks”(63). It also claims the legacy of being used as a mystical offensive mechanism. Gibbons tells us how

Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1898), has an entry on “Rhyming to Death”. “The Irish at one time believed that their children and cattle could

be ‘eybitten’, that is, bewitched by an evil eye, and that the ‘eybitter,’ or ‘witch,’ could ‘rime’ them to death.” That is both a belief in an evil eye and an evil mouth. On “Irish rats rhymed to death,” Brewer says” “It was once a prevalent opinion that rats in pasturages could be extirpated by anathematizing them in rhyming verse or by metrical charms.” (63)

It is highly likely that, in being able to create “elaborate rhyme schemes,” Sexton experienced the vicarious power of being able to reimagine and reshape dynamics, as well as convey hidden resonances. This may be construed by many as “magical thinking,” but it is a very real capability of the use of form, especially when applied to situations that involve constraint or oppression. It is important, however, to not consider form, and rhyme in particular, as purely a transmitter of the rejection of old alliances but also a means of reaching out and establishing contact and intimacy, albeit according to a different “frequency.” Amongst the rare examples of letters from Mary Gray retained by Sexton is the following:

We have always been a two-way radio, with perhaps one exception — Do *you* suppose subconsciously you feel — that *if* you don’t please ME you are losing an anchor? I would not know — but I have a feeling that your love for me and my “sympatica” for you — could be licking you ...  
*You* — Anne — my sweet daughter find life unattractive — Sometimes I do, *too* — and cry and cry —all full of self-pity and utter misery —So I can understand how you feel — Yet — you have something to give — *a* word — The word — a beautiful appreciation of what life — nature —and human relationship does — *You* are not anyone’s baby — *You* are adult in your sense of decency — Granted — trees rot — plants die —we humans fail — *but* we are spirit — It may be BUM spirit —but it’s something —(qtd. in Middlebrook, *ASB* 47)

Throughout her life, Sexton would view her relationship with her mother, problematic as it was, in connection with the symbol of the radio.<sup>89</sup> Certainly, this letter from Mary Gray, with its use of em dashes and fractured syntax, conveys the idea of a connection made and lost but propelled by a kind of enduring urgency. A similar emotional resonance can be perceived at the end of “Christmas Eve.”<sup>90</sup> Sitting vigil and drinking beneath her mother’s portrait (a companion piece to that of the poet from “The Double Image”), the speaker, “waiting, inexhaustible, thirty-five,” attempts to reckon with her mixed feelings, a process which gives rise to its own Nativity: the gift of tentative forgiveness borne of the passage of time. The whisper of sonic coherence, perceptible through assonance and light rhyme, comes through in the poem’s final stanza:

u u / / u  
Then I said Mary-  
/ u /u u / u  
Mary, || Mary, || forgive me  
u / u / u / u \ u /  
and then I touched a present for the child,  
u / u / u / u /  
the last I bred before your death;  
u / u / u /  
and then I touched my breast  
u / u / u /  
and then I touched the floor

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<sup>89</sup> Having plucked a portable radio off the bedside table of her mother as she lay dying, Sexton kept this and other radios playing throughout her day—during work, meals, and sleep. “I will die with this radio playing,” she wrote. As her suicide proved, she remained true to her word (Middlebrook, *ASB* 47).

<sup>90</sup> *LD*.

u / u / u / u /  
and then my breast again as if,  
/ u \ u / u /  
somehow, || it were one of yours. (48-55)

In reading Sexton’s earlier poems about Mary Gray and thinking about the radio metaphor, the wavering in and out of rhyme with its dual imperative to both bewitch and connect (or imply a failure to do either) is curious and poignant. The twinship the poet shared with Mary Gray was filled with its measure of pain, frustration, and struggle, but the love was there. In looking at elements including both the form and musicality of Sexton’s work and the way in which the poet chose to exit life, it becomes amply clear that—for better or worse—the connection was never truly broken.

“[R]earranging the disaligned”: Form and the Redefinition of Domestic Space

For Anne Sexton, entry into the realm of the suburban housewife class was a given, a marker of normalcy in white post-war American culture where, to quote Adrienne Rich, “in reaction to the earlier wave of feminisms. middle-class women were making careers of domestic perfection” (qtd. in Michailidou 70). As a young wife, Sexton had thrown herself headlong into the pursuit of this idealized “career,” or at least the image of it. A slightly cloying letter written to Ralph and Mary Gray dated November 2, 1948—a week before her twentieth birthday—reveals the somewhat hyperbolic lengths she was initially willing to go to show off her kitchen skills:

My cooking has taken a slight turn for the better. This morning we had coffee cake with our breakfast. We both thought it was delicious and it was. Tonight I made

pineapple muffins — they are muffins with little bits of chopped up pineapple in them and they were also very edible. In fact I get two gold stars for today. I made an apple pie last week that was not so successful. In the first place the recipe was for an eight inch pie and then I found I had only a ten inch pie plate. This caused me to stretch the pastry out and as a result the filling was too meager. But a first attempt isn't expected to be too wonderful so I do not feel disheartened. (Sexton and Ames 20)

As Sexton's marriage progressed and her mental health worsened after the arrival of her daughters, her ability to participate in what would have been seen as the "normal" routines fell away. Kayo, Mary Gray, and Billie Sexton (her mother-in-law) stepped into the fray to assist with, or provide paid access to, domestic help (Middlebrook *ASB* 33-35). Sexton herself was acutely aware of her perceived "coming up short" in the housewife department as well as her own mounting disillusionment with her role and how it dovetailed with her illness. Unlike, for example, Phyllis McGinley, the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Poet Laureate of Suburbia" whose poems dwelt on the domestic with no additive more acidic than the wistful or the gently ironic,<sup>91</sup> Sexton viewed the domestic sphere as part of the monster that had come to bear down upon her. An interview with Barbara Keyles presents Sexton reflecting on her collision with the precepts of the *Feminine Mystique*:

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<sup>91</sup>In spite of her popularity at the time and her prolific production (five collections), McGinley's work was labelled "light verse", and she was dismissed (and largely unanthologized) by the poetry establishment of the mid-20th Century. Omitted from previous editions of *Modern American Poetry*, her work finally made it into the eighth edition, albeit as a quaint and prissy "foil" to firebrand confessionals such as Lowell and Snodgrass. The editor Louis Untermeyer added insult to injury by writing how McGinley was "abnormally normal...at home with what others have rejected as too familiar and too unimportant for poetry" (Gill, "Phyllis McGinley needs no puff"... 355).

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children...I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white fences to keep nightmares out. (qtd. in Michailidou 71)

However, rather than completely negate the domestic as a concept, Sexton uses poetic form to approach it from two sides in order to discuss greater themes of madness, agency, the primacy of the female body, and the search for greater spiritual truths. On the one hand, she uses the imagery and discourse of the suburbs in order to examine its inhumanity and the possibilities which lie beyond. On the other hand, she uses structures such as line length, metre, and rhyme to contain, grapple with, and potentially transform the realms of madness and the institution, taking control and transforming these liminal spaces into sites of possibility. Although one cannot assign an intentional link between the use of form and the staving off of madness or oppression (or both), form allows the reader/listener to think with and feel domestic anxiety in an alternate and highly immediate way.

Sexton's marriage to Kayo, if her letters are anything to go by, seemed affectionate enough. In spite of this, dysfunction flourished; there was the abiding need for the adult Anne to be showered with the care and approval normally associated with a needy child. In the presence of an aloof mother, Anne had sought such physical and emotional reassurance from her great aunt "Nana" Dingley, as well as—destructively—

from her children.<sup>92</sup> Kayo was also not exempt; in addition to being called on to bring up the rear in terms of domestic duties, he was (as is suggested by the anxieties represented at the end of “One for My Dame”) expected to provide a level of comfort that would mould itself to Sexton’s regression. In her biography of the poet, Middlebrook lays out the nightly routine: “At home, the emotional dynamic she yearned for was captured in the refrain she demanded nightly from Kayo while he stroked her head: ‘Yes, Anne, you are a good girl’” (*ASB* 167). The status of being “good,” in Sexton’s case, seems to have stemmed from her notions of herself as an unfinished child—a “half-mended thing”—rather than as an adult participant in the mid-century American domestic machine. In the latter role, Sexton felt trapped and numbed, a sensation which echoes in “The Farmer’s Wife.”<sup>93</sup> Here, the speaker coolly observes, in the third-person voice, a young wife musing over what has led her into a dull decade-long union:

(u) \    u   /        /    u  
From | the hodge | porridge  
(u) \    u   /    u   /  
of   | their coun | try lust,

---

<sup>92</sup> Linda Sexton relays how the poet would intermittently insist on playing a game called “being nine”, wherein mother and child would switch roles. These role-plays often took place in bed and eventually gave way to incidences where Sexton would crawl into Linda’s bed and masturbate beside her. As disassociated from reality as Sexton might have been, her actions were understandably catastrophically destructive to both Linda’s psyche and the relationship which existed between them. Thus it was that the boundaries between regressive behaviour—what Linda termed the “compulsion to repeat and *recast* her own history”—and sexual transgression blurred and were crossed, to the detriment of both Linda and Joyce’s safety and well-being (Middlebrook, *ASB* 203-204, 223-224).

<sup>93</sup> *Bedlam*.



u / u / u / u /  
their loc | al life | in Il | linois,  
u / u / u /  
where all | their acr | es look  
(u)\ u / u / /(uu)  
like | a sprout | ing broom factory,  
u / u / / /  
they name | just ten | years now  
u / u / u / (u)  
that she | has been | his habit; (1-7)

The youthful passion the couple once felt has led to a place of stagnation, one where brooms—that symbol of both domestic cleanliness and witchcraft—seem to sprout from the surrounding land itself, and the woman subject has been reduced to the status of a “habit.” The metre is, with the exception of Line 3, iambic trimeter, trapping the subject in the same constrictive visual and sonic column that characterizes “The Moss of His Skin.” Here we have a subject who perceives herself as similarly buried alive, her existence enlivened only by the “brief bright bridge / of the raucous bed”—marital sex. The poem rolls on with no caesura breaks (i.e. no place to breathe); one is led to consider the existence of a toxic sameness. As Fraiman lays out, this sameness exists not only as a crushing psychological affect but (in its illusory form) as a necessary gesture in domestic myth-making:

Vulnerable, hybrid, heterogeneous, and dynamic—all these attributes serve to debunk received naturalized notions of home as inert and one-dimensional. All argue, instead, for the domestic as a site of change and complexity. What they suggest, too, is the invented-ness of domestic life ... The doing of domesticity involves labor that is physical and affective as well as ideological and women generally get the brunt of it. Ironically, however, housekeepers spend much of their

energy sustaining the illusion of sameness, creating the impression that from day to day, nothing much has changed ... “What did you do all day?” Asks the husband returning to a house whose tidiness appears undisturbed. Yet we hardly need Marxist feminists ... to tell us that the illusion of sameness ... actually requires a never ending expenditure of effort, tireless running just to stay in place. (123)

The impulse that Sexton demonstrates in her handling of both her subject matter and the form used to frame and direct it shows flashes of transformative resistance. Refusing to keep her subject as a “habit,” she saves a depth charge for the very end of the poem, where the true context of the situation is revealed. The husband, whom the poem describes in his post-coital sleep state as “still strong in the blowsy bag” (26), is coarse and unrefined but also inconveniently resilient. However, the poet—and thus the subject—is able to shatter both the domestic situation and the relationship between subjects and speaker:

u u / u u / u u/(u)  
and she wish | es him cripp | ple, || or poet,  
u / u / u u / (u)  
or ev | en lone | ly, || or sometimes,  
(u)/u u / u /  
better, || | my lov | er, || dead. (30-32)

It is here that the speaker enacts a shift upon the proceedings; she drives caesurae into the poem’s last three lines as she effectively not only disables the sleeping husband (imagining him “a cripple”) but gains revenge by suffusing him with the autobiographical, wishing him to be as broken and as close to death as she feels.

Whereas the subject of “The Farmer’s Wife” is a somewhat cognizant (if disillusioned) participant in the marriage dynamic, Sexton often turns to the image of the doll/puppet to show wives/family members paralyzed by circumstance and/or existential trance states, unable to speak or demand pleasure and laid prone to sexual violence:

The same dreadful set,  
The same family of orange and pink faces  
Carved and dressed up like puppets  
Who wait for their jaws to open and shut.

(“The House” 6-9)<sup>94</sup>

At six  
I lived in a graveyard full of dolls,  
avoiding myself,  
my body, the suspect  
in its grotesque house.

(“Those Times...” 1-4)<sup>95</sup>

No matter what life you lead  
the virgin is a lovely number:  
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,  
arms and legs made of Limoges,  
lips like Vin Du Rhône,  
rolling her china-blue doll eyes  
open and shut.  
Open to say,  
Good Day Mama,  
and shut for the thrust  
of the unicorn.

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<sup>94</sup> *All my Pretty Ones*, 1962 (referred to hereinafter as *AMPO*).

<sup>95</sup> *LD*.

(“Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” 1-10)<sup>96</sup>

The doll image is central to “Self in 1958”, an earlier Sexton poem that had found itself relegated to what the poet called her “bone pile” before it was rediscovered and inserted into *Live or Die* (1962). Comprising four ten-line stanzas made up of roughly rising metrical lines of varying lengths and with irregular rhymes, the poem balances the ragged with the homogeneous. In the first stanza, we encounter the wife-figure who, in an extension of the dehumanization/infantilization she has experienced as both a housewife-citizen of the times and the product of her childhood, has been transformed into not a habit but a thing:

/ u u/uu  
What is reality?  
/ u u / u / u /  
I am a plaster doll; || I pose  
u / u u / u u u / u u / u  
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall  
u / u u / u / u / u  
upon some shellacked and grinning person,  
(u)/ u /u / / u /  
eyes that open, || blue, || steel, || and close.  
u / u / u u u u/ / u / \  
Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?  
u u / / /u  
I have hair, || black angel,  
/ / u / u u /  
black-angel-stuffing to comb,  
/ u / / u u /  
nylon legs, || luminous arms

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<sup>96</sup> *Transformations*, 1971.

u u / u u /  
and some advertised clothes. (1-10)

The doll-wife is described in terms of her movable parts: eyes that open regardless of the time of day, stockinged legs, smooth arms. It is implied that she has black hair, but the syntax that Sexton employs skews the modification towards the surreal in order to suggest that the doll, a “black angel” with “black angel stuffing to comb,” is possessed of an interior that requires—or defies—the imposition of order. There are examples of “clang” nestled within the lines: the repetition of “fall,” “black angel,” and “eyes,” as well as the yawning fullness of the diphthong “o” (/əʊ/) in “open,” “close,” “comb,” and “clothes.” Marked by Capitalist privilege (via the reference to the upscale department store I. Magnin), the doll-wife is but a dream-composite; the final line of the stanza, tacked on with “and,” underlines this with grim, contemporary precision. The second stanza expounds on the constraints of the doll-wife’s environment:

u / u u / /  
I live in a doll’s house  
u / /  
with four chairs,  
u /u u /u u / /  
a counterfeit table, || a flat roof  
u u / / /  
and a big front door.  
/ u u / u / u / \ /  
Many have come to such a small crossroad.  
/ u u /u /  
There is an iron bed,  
/ u /u / / /  
(Life enlarges, || life takes aim)

u / u /  
a cardboard floor,  
/ u u / /u u / u /u  
windows that flash open on someone's city,  
u /u /  
and little more. (11-20)

In terms of rhythm, there is more of a heavier spondaic emphasis (“**doll’s house**”; “**four chairs**”; “**flat roof**”; “**front door**”; “**takes aim**”), which could be perceived as amplifying a mood of entrapment and oppression. There is exactly room enough (“four chairs”) for a standard couple and two children (as per the American advertising ideal); the “flat” ceiling bears down on the doll-wife while the “big front door,” even as it invites the world in for favours, prevents the doll-wife from exiting into an external location that belongs to “someone” but not her. At the heart of the stanza hovers another Sextonian image—that of the bed.<sup>97</sup> Made of iron and incongruously situated on a “cardboard floor,” the bed not only resonates with not only intimations of sexual violence but also reminders of institutionalization. Finally, the stanza ends with another “and” tag (“and little more”), completing another triptych of open-vowel rhymes. In the third stanza, the subject is put into action as a plaything, as the faceless “someone” from the outside invades and imposes their will:

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<sup>97</sup> The bed, in Sexton’s poetry, appears in a number of incarnations, connoting (amongst other things) carnal love (“The Farmer’s Wife”; “The Breast”), abandonment (“The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator”), hospitalization and/or the degradation of vitality (“Elizabeth Gone”; “The Break”), and sexual abuse/incest (“Rapunzel”; “Briar Rose”).

/ u / u \  
Someone plays with me,  
/ u \ u / u /u /u  
plants me in the all-electric kitchen,  
u / u /u / u u \  
Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?  
/ u u / u \  
Someone pretends with me—  
/ u / u /u \ u /  
I am walled in solid by their noise—  
u / u u/ u / /  
or puts me upon their straight bed.  
u / u u /  
They think I am me!  
u / u / u / u /  
Their warmth? || Their warmth is not a friend!  
u / u / u u / u /  
They pry my mouth for their cups of gin  
u u / /  
and their stale bread. (21-30)

The doll-wife, mentioned only in the passive voice and/or as the object of the actions of others, finds herself trapped in the electrified buzz of a modern kitchen, a location that radiates danger rather than convenience and which would later be immortalized in the work of Sexton's friend Sylvia Plath:<sup>98</sup>

Viciousness in the kitchen!  
The potatoes hiss.  
It is all Hollywood, windowless,  
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine ...  
("Lesbos" 1-4)

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<sup>98</sup> Plath and Sexton met in Robert Lowell's writing seminar at Boston University in 1959. The women developed a warm, if wary, professional relationship and took to venturing out (with George Starbuck) for martinis post-class (Middlebrook, *ASB* 103-108).

In her article “Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising,” Marsha Bryant draws connections between the image of the kitchen as a site of phantasmagorical/transformational potential—“a dreamscape of daily miracles”—in both Plath’s work and 1950’s advertising (17). In Sexton’s kitchen, no miracles occur. Rather, the compression of the stanza turns the doll-wife’s environment into a kind of bedsit from hell, where the kitchen, presided over by the spectre of the author of a legendary mid-century cookbook,<sup>99</sup> finds itself cheek by jowl with the “straight bed.” In terms of language, there is a struggle between the words “someone,” the pronouns “their” and “they,” and the beleaguered “I”/“me,” who finds herself misunderstood and effectively cannibalized in the last two lines.<sup>100</sup> In the final stanza, the poem returns to the question of the doll-wife’s identity and her inability to act beyond the bounds of the poem and her role in society:

    /   u u/uu  
What is reality  
u   /   u /u   /  
to this synthetic doll  
u    u   /       u    u   /    /  
who should smile, || who should shift gears,  
  u       /   u /    /u u u /   u    u /u  
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,

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<sup>99</sup> *The Joy of Cooking*, written by Irma S. Rombauer, was first published in 1936 and has remained in print ever since.

<sup>100</sup> Food and mouth imagery would also loom large in Sexton’s work, especially the poems that would appear in *Transformations*. According to Linda Sexton, food—typically prepared and served by Kayo— was never celebrated or served in abundance in the Sexton home. On top of this, the poet displayed a marked “queasiness” towards food, which resulted in her being frequently ill after meals (Middlebrook, *ASB* 333-334).



u / u / u u u / u u /  
and have no evidence of ruin or fears?  
u / u /  
But I would cry,  
/ u \ u u / u  
rooted into the wall that  
u / u / u  
was once my mother,  
u / u u / u /  
if I could remember how  
u \ u / u /  
and if I had the tears. (31-40)

The doll-wife, engineered to provide care and pleasure, is initially viewed from a distance, via the third-person voice, as the potential agent in a daring escape; metrically, the anticipation and the possibility of a leap forward into the unknown are signalled through what resembles a double iamb (“who should **shift gears**”) and the triple-metre skip of Lines 31, 33, 34, 35, 37, and 39. But the answer to this rhetorical question offers no hope: for all the variations in the poem-container itself, “wholesome disorder” cannot prevail. The structure that the doll-wife finds herself trapped in comprises not only the physical space of the house but also the existential space that has emerged from familial continuity; there is the overwhelming impression that she has neither evaded the fate of her mother’s transition nor sufficiently disengaged in order to cope. In the last part of the poem, the lines tighten, and the sense of the handed-down emotional disconnect practically seizes the reader/listener in a chokehold, as the last of the poem’s four “and” taglines rounds the work off with a mixture of poignancy and horror.

The role of heredity in the incarceration of a woman-subject in domestic spaces would recur throughout Sexton's work; it had appeared in a more compressed incarnation in the short poem "Housewife,"<sup>101</sup> which describes the domestic in organic terms, more specifically, the entrapment of bodies within bodies:

u / u / u / u  
Some women marry houses.  
u u /u / u / u / u /  
It's another kind of skin; || it has a heart,  
u / u /u u / \ u  
a mouth, || a liver and bowel movements.  
u / u / u \ u /  
The walls are permanent and pink.  
/ u u / u u / \ /  
See how she sits on her knees all day,  
/ u u / u u / /  
faithfully washing herself down.  
/ /u u / / / u /u  
Men enter by force, || drawn back like Jonah  
/ u u /u /u  
into their fleshy mothers.  
u /u / u /u  
A woman is her mother.  
/ u / /  
That's the main thing.

In discussing this poem, Paul Lacey points out that the self comes to a moment of realization concerning its entrapment, with regard to not only the physical space of a house but also the body—which can be violated—and the family bonds which prime the subject to suffer such confinements (105). At the core of the work's bleakness is the

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<sup>101</sup> *AMPO*.

mother-bond, which can be seen as the logical follow-up to the two matching portraits in “The Double Image.” Mary Gray’s obsession with genital “rightness” and cleanliness, and the borderline abuse she inflicted upon her daughter as a result, have ballooned to become one all-consuming metaphor for how awareness of the ailing and violated body merges with that of the needs of the all-demanding mid-century home. But there is another unexpected angle to consider: of particular interest, in terms of the structure and syntax of the poem, is how it echoes “I Would Live in Your Love” by Sara Teasdale:

I would live in your love as the sea-grasses live in the sea,  
Borne up by each wave as it passes, drawn down by each wave that  
recedes;  
I would empty my soul of the dreams that have gathered in me,  
I would beat with your heart as it beats, I would follow your soul  
as it leads.

To begin with, there are images of advancing and receding, inhabiting another in order to find (or forget) the self before being pulled back. The difference is, in Sexton’s case, that there is the entire absence of sentimental transport. There is no love in this removal from/ moving back into a realm or a person; there only exists the idea that the body cannot escape the broken self that has been conditioned, by previous generations, for violation. In comparing these two poems, one might also consider the possible scenario of the domestically-located female voice being stripped of poetic agency; in her first (and abortive) days as a schoolgirl poet, Sexton had admired Teasdale and copied out her verses. When her “Cinquains” were accepted by the school yearbook, it was Teasdale

whom Mary Gray had erroneously pinpointed as the source of Anne's suspected plagiarism. This sets up another interesting dimension to the nature of the particular confinement which "Housewife" presents.

As Sexton's poetic practice moved onwards, her adherence to metrical and stanzaic form, as well as metre, began to dissolve. In *Transformations*, a new kind of form begins to make itself apparent: that involving structurally and tonally similar blocks of language that build a storyteller's momentum, playing off against the reader/listener's expectations:

You always read about it:  
the plumber with the twelve children  
who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.  
From toilets to riches.  
That story.

Or the nursemaid,  
some luscious sweet from Denmark  
who captures the oldest son's heart.  
From diapers to Dior.  
That story.

Or a milkman who serves the wealthy,  
eggs, cream, butter, yogurt, milk,  
the white truck like an ambulance  
who goes into real estate  
and makes a pile.  
From homogenized to martinis at lunch.

Or the charwoman  
who is on the bus when it cracks up  
and collects enough from the insurance.  
From mops to Bonwit Teller.  
That story.

(“Cinderella” 1-21)

In addition to harnessing progressively colloquial discourse, the poems from *Transformations* onwards amp up their inclusion of the physical and commercial apparatus of American mid-century suburbia. Commenting on that which he perceived to be the “sensuous surface” of Sexton’s work, Steven Axelrod notes how the poet “excels at what I would tentatively term the ‘bourgeois image,’” drawing attention to its material cosmology of “Plymouth fenders, salad anchovies, batter, Coke bottles, tension headaches, Cannon towels, frozen haddock, pantsuits and names of hotel chains”(67). The use of these elements sets up a distance from tradition, enables a potentially performative connection with others (not least of which are those trapped in similar logistical or psychological circumstances) and reaches outward beyond the ordinary into a realm that courts spiritual acceptance and deliverance. The first eleven lines from the “First Psalm” section of “O, Ye Tongues”<sup>102</sup> incorporate mundane mid-century elements into an anaphora-rich entreaty that evokes influences including Walt Whitman and the Bible:

Let there be a God as large as a sunlamp to laugh his heat at you.

Let there be an earth with a form like a jigsaw and let it fit for all of ye.

Let there be the darkness of a darkroom out of the deep. A worm room.

Let there be a God who sees light at the end of a long thin pipe and lets it in.

Let God divide them in half.

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<sup>102</sup> *The Death Notebooks*, 1974.

Let God share his Hoodsie.

Let the waters divide so that God may wash his face in first light.

Let there be pin holes in the sky in which God puts his little finger.

Let the stars be a heaven of jelly rolls and babies laughing.

Let light be called Day so that men may grow corn or take busses.

Let there be on the second day dry land so that all men may dry their toes with  
Cannon towels. (1-11)

For Sexton, the domestic, oppressive in both its past legacies and present obligations, was the hell which she had endeavoured to escape her whole life; works such as “O, Ye Tongues” show the poet burrowing into the realm of the domestic image in order to cast her exploratory net wider afield.

When we think about the illness that marked Sexton’s life and work, it is tempting to follow the lead of today’s backward-looking compressed narratives and view her as the legend: the housewife who broke down, turned on the television one night by accident, had a Damascene conversion, began writing, and, in doing so, came to wage war against the idea of domestic life and her use of recognizable form before taking her own life in a suburban garage. It is, however, essential to draw attention to how Sexton maintained a love for (and a belief in) order and intimacy. This dyad provided meaning and comfort in moments and environments where there seemed to be not much of either. Part of what is interesting about Sexton’s poetic practice is the way in which she uses form to

superimpose domestic elements onto, and thus lend an air of intimacy to, both her illness and the world of the institution. One of the male figures on whom Sexton was to project her need for father-approval was the poet, professor, and critic John Holmes, under whom she studied, starting in 1956, at the Boston Center for Adult Education. Although kind and committed, Holmes's life had been accursed by its own traumas, and thus he recoiled from the confessional nature of Sexton's work, especially her discussions of the suicidal impulse.<sup>103</sup> Giving voice to the mid-century masculinist spirit of stoic denial, he told her, regarding her inflammatory work, "Don't publish it...you will certainly outgrow it and become another person" (Middlebrook, *ASB* 49-50, 100). Sexton's response regarding Holmes's aversion and resulting prescription can be found in "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further"; here, she assures her teacher that madness has its own logic and that its articulation can embody a spirit of generosity towards others who suffer:

Not that it was beautiful,  
but that, in the end, there was  
a certain sense of order there;  
something worth learning

.....

And if I tried  
to give you something else,  
something outside of myself,  
you would not know

---

<sup>103</sup> Holmes's first wife had committed suicide in a staged and grisly fashion. Of his trepidation regarding Sexton, Kumin reports how, although he acknowledged her talent, he had repudiated her in her attempts to fashion him into her "Christian academic daddy" (Middlebrook, *ASB* 100).

that the worst of anyone  
can be, finally,  
an accident of hope. (1-4, 10-16)

Central to the poem is the image of a cracked bowl; its brokenness no longer makes it useful in a domestic setting but turns it into a fantastic prism for sharing the shards of light that emerge from inner pain:

I tapped my own head;  
it was glass, an inverted bowl.  
It is a small thing  
to rage in your own bowl.  
At first it was private.  
Then it was more than myself;  
it was you, or your house  
or your kitchen.  
And if you turn away  
because there is no lesson here  
I will hold my awkward bowl,  
with all its cracked stars shining  
like a complicated lie,  
and fasten a new skin around it  
as if I were dressing an orange  
or a strange sun. (17-32)

In her article “That Awful Rowing,” Pollitt expands on how the image of the fractured kitchen bowl becomes a metaphor for how experience can be transformed by poetry:

Further, the act of offering her own breakage as a gift shifted her relation both to her suffering and to the beholder. In the metaphor of the bowl whose cracks become stars, Sexton avows belief that her experience has been redeemed by its transformation into the social medium of language. “Star” in her personal mythology will from now on designate that place—the poetic symbol—where the language of private suffering grows radiant and magically ambiguous. (74)



In looking at Sexton's practice, we can make further metaphoric leaps, examining how the form of a poem can be seen *as* the bowl; varied, altered, cracked, it permits illumination. When we see how Sexton uses form to contain and make sense of madness or the institution, it is not to show that the speaker has outgrown the situation and become another person (to use the parlance of Holmes). Rather, I believe that Sexton's use of form—pulled, teased, condensed, cracked—presents us, in a performative way, with the emotional texture of the experience itself, as well as the hope which it offers.

Sexton did not shy from showing her “cracked stars shining” onstage. It was an accepted fact that she suffered from a considerable degree of anxiety when it came to touring and preparing for readings and public appearances (Middlebrook *ASB* 139-140, 242; 287). However, once behind a podium or fronting her band *Her Kind*, pre-sauced with a number of vodkas and armed with an unending succession of cigarettes, she brought her A-game. Unlike many of her contemporaries, who exhibited a shuffling, self-apologetic professorial air (think, for example, of Elizabeth Bishop), Sexton threw herself into her readings, using her willowy, stylishly-dressed form and smoky voice to full theatrical effect. Ovation were common, and Sexton—always a glutton for adoration—loved it. One person who did *not* love it was Sexton's closest friend Kumin, who found Sexton's performances “melodramatic and stagey,” adding, “I felt that they took away from the marvellous texture of the poems by making them into performances” (Middlebrook, *ASB* 238, 306). For Sexton, however, performance was the logical

extension of her quest to break free from domestic constraint, allowing her two languages —that of madness and that of the poet—to take flight and render her poem-making, that “solitary act,” a three-dimensional ritual.

Every reading began with a performance of “Her Kind”;<sup>104</sup> Sexton considered the poem a kind of calling card, laying out to the public her identity as both woman and poet (Middlebrook, *ASB* 114-115). Whatever one might think of Kumin’s assessment of Sexton’s public presentational style, it behooves us to consider this poem in terms of its own “marvellous texture” and how Sexton’s use of form both contains and makes palpable the agony and agency of the woman othered by difference. The poem as a text is made up of three roughly iambic seven-line stanzas; this in itself conveys a sense of “lopsidedness,” that which refuses to be defined in terms of even numbers. The first six lines of each stanza vary in length from four to five feet, while the final line—a refrain—is fixed at three. The first stanza presents the woman subject as outside of accepted society, moving in the world with the intent to harm or change but being removed from the true ability to do so:

/ u / / u u / /  
 I have | gone out, || a pos | sessed witch,  
 / u u / / /u u /  
 haunting | the black air, || braver | at night;  
 (u)/ u / u / u / u /  
 dream | ing ev | il, || I | have done | my hitch  
 (u)/ u u / / u / u /  
 ov | er the | plain hous | es, || light | by light:

---

<sup>104</sup> *Bedlam*.

(u) / u / / / u / u /  
 lone | ly thing, || twelve-fin | gered, || out | of mind.  
 u / u u / u / u / u /  
 A wo | man like that | is not | a wom | an, || quite.  
 (u) / u / u /  
 I | have been | her kind. (1-7)

The witch figure, emboldened by darkness and isolation, is able to hover above the ordinary, to observe and comment, but is shown as “dreaming evil” rather than exacting it upon others. The flight above the “plain houses” is not a fantastical journey but rather the subject’s “hitch”—her period of service, her time. “Lonely,” she is condemned to watch as one “out of mind.” This is not to say that, sonically, the stanza does not build suspense; Sexton incorporates initial trochees in the first and second lines (“**I** have”; “**haunting**”), double iambs in the first and fourth lines (“a possessed **witch**”; “over the **plain hous-**”), stand-alone spondees in the first and fifth lines (“**gone out**”; “**twelve-fing-**”), and a bacchius in the second line; (“the **black air**”); these lay dramatic emphasis in the strange, as do the incidences of assonance (the /i:/ sound in “dreaming evil”) and the internal rhyme with “thing” and “fingered” in Line 5.

In the second stanza we are moved indoors to observe another woman who can be considered a different outsider altogether or simply a different aspect of the first:

(u) / u / u / / \ u /  
 I | have found | the warm | caves in | the woods,  
 (u) / u u / u / u /  
 filled | them with skil | lets, || car | vings, || shelves,  
 (u) / u / u \ u /  
 clos | ets, || silks, || innum | era | ble goods;

(u)/ u / u u u / u u /  
fixed | the sup | pers for the worms | and the elves:  
(u)/ u / u / u u / u /  
whin | ing, || re | arran | ging the dis | aligned.  
u / u u / u / u u /  
A wom | an like that | is mis | understood.  
(u)/ u / u /  
I | have been | her kind. (8-14)

We see the speaker as the busy but miserable curator of domestic space, accumulating “innumerable” objects both necessary and extravagant and engaged in preparing food for beings both terrestrial (“worms,” those devourers of the dead) and supernatural (“elves”). The task of ordering, “rearranging the disaligned” is an onerous one for the subject, who is shown “whining”; assonance involving the diphthong vowel /aɪ/ (“**whining**”; “disaligned”) amplifies the mood behind the phrasing. And yet there is order: the subject’s being out of step with imposed obligations is skilfully aligned with an appropriate set of metrical substitutions; anapaestic variations in Lines 9, 11, 12, and 13, (“them with **skil-**”; “and the **elves**”; “-ging the **dis-**”; “-an like **that**”; “**understood**”), along with a fourth paeon (“-pers for the **worms**”) in Line 11, lend an air of claustrophobic bustle. The result of all this busywork is that the subject remains “misunderstood” by those around her; scramble as she may to order domestic space, she is still an outsider.

The final stanza of “Her Kind” merges the iconic images of witch and madwoman with the spectre of the adulteress, that destroyer of the hearth and home, as the amalgam subject is literally carted off to be burned at the stake:

(u)/ u / u u \ / / (u)  
 I | have rid | den in your | cart, || driver,  
 (u)/ u / / u / u u / u /  
 waved | my nude arms | at vill | ages go | ing by,  
 (u)/ u u / / / u / (u)  
 learn | ing the last | bright routes, || survivor  
 (u)/ u / \ / u /  
 where | your flames | still bite | my thigh  
 u u / / u u / u /  
 and my | ribs crack | where your whe | els wind.  
 u / u u / u / u / u /  
 A wom | an like that | is not | ashamed | to die.  
 (u)/ u / u /  
 I | have been | her kind. (15-21)

Here, scansion reveals that this last stanza combines (through Lines 15 to 19) the spondaic/bacchic punch of the variations in the first stanza with the lilt of the anapaestic variations in the second stanza. The subject has collided with the unreasonable expectations of the world at large and must die. The narrative trajectory of “Her Kind” begins with the journey of an impotent outsider, moves on to a harried prisoner of the interior domestic realm, and then ends with the imminent death of a pariah. Yet the rickety perfection of its three stanzas and their skillful use of metrical variation provides a space for both kinds of language—that of madness and that of the poet. It is a place where the outsider could feel at home and which would resonate strongly with both the reader and the audience member.

As to whether or not the institution made Sexton feel “at home” remains highly debatable. On the one hand, it both saved Sexton’s life on several occasions as well as provided her with access to the “language” of the mad which came to co-exist in her

practice and cosmology with that of the poet. On the other hand, the institution was the place where (to use the language of “You, Dr. Martin”) “tall children” were infantilized by a system that confined them to “separate boxes.” Amongst the many factors which led Sexton to suicide was a fear of institutions, of being trapped and relegated to a twilight of regression (Middlebrook, *ASB* 395). And yet Sexton’s poems which deal with madness and alienation within the walls of the institution are amongst her most moving. In “Music Swims Back to Me,”<sup>105</sup> the poet lays out, in free verse, her speaker’s sense of disorientation as she appeals, in childlike tones, to a “Mister” who promotes parental guidance and redirection:

Wait Mister. Which way is home?  
They turned the light out  
and the dark is moving in the corner.  
There are no sign posts in this room,  
four ladies, over eighty,  
in diapers every one of them.  
La la la, Oh music swims back to me  
and I can feel the tune they played  
the night they left me  
in this private institution on a hill. (1-10)

Using the symbol of the radio, that object which linked Sexton and Mary Gray physically and metaphorically, Sexton tells us about the sense of extra-logical abandon that sweeps over the patients:

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<sup>105</sup> *Bedlam*.

Imagine it. A radio playing  
and everyone here was crazy.  
I liked it and danced in a circle.  
Music pours over the sense  
and in a funny way  
music sees more than I.  
I mean it remembers better; (11-17)

In reading about this music that “knows more,” we are brought back to the idea of the “language” of madness that had come to Sexton after her first spell in the institution, as well as how it works alongside the language of poetry. The radio becomes the transmitter, not of something that takes *away* from the patient but which offers them a subterfuge, an alternate form of knowledge and expression. In “Ringing the Bells,” the poet describes, in free verse heavily inflected with a triple-metre swing (or spin, as the case may be), the arrival at the institution of a music therapist:

u / u u / u /  
And this is the way they ring  
u / u / u  
the bells in Bedlam  
u / u u / /u  
and this is the bell-lady  
u / u / u / u  
who comes each Tuesday morning  
u / u u /u /u  
to give us a music lesson  
u u / u u / u / u /  
and because the attendants make you go  
u u / u / u / u  
and because we mind by instinct,  
u / / \ u / /  
like bees caught in the wrong hive,

/ u u /u u / u /u  
we are the circle of crazy ladies  
u / u u / u u / u /  
who sit in the lounge of the mental house  
u / u u /u / u  
and smile at the smiling woman  
u / u u / u /  
who passes us each a bell,  
u / u u /  
who points at my hand  
u / u / / /  
that holds my bell, || E flat ... (1-14)

The triple-metre insertions, along with the mention of the “circle of crazy ladies,” the use of anaphora, and the repetition of certain rhetorical structures, create an impression of wild headiness and take the reader/listener back to Bishop’s “Visit to St. Elizabeth’s”:

/ u u / u u / u u /  
These are the years and the walls and the door  
u / u u / u / u /  
that shut on a boy that pats the floor  
u / u u / u / u /  
to feel if the world is there and flat.  
/ u u / u u / u u /  
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat  
u / u / u u / u /  
that dances joyfully down the ward  
/u u / u / u /  
into the parting seas of board  
u u /u /u  
past the staring sailor  
u / u /  
that shakes his watch  
u / u /  
that tells the time  
u u /u u /  
of the poet, || the man



u / u u / u / u  
that lies in the house of Bedlam. (56-66)

However, whereas Bishop is operating from a place of morbid wonder and aversion (driven by the traumas associated with her mother’s mental illness and the poet’s own acute fear of mental deterioration), Sexton manages to pluck from her madhouse a sliver of hope; the “bells” may be perceived as a signifier of the secret language of the mad, a means of channelling and performing human authenticity:

u / u / u / u u /  
and this is how the bells really sound,  
u u / u u /  
as untroubled and clean  
u u / u u / u  
as a workable kitchen,  
u / u / u u / u / u  
and this is always my bell responding  
u u / u u / u u /u  
to my hand that responds to the lady  
u / u / / /  
who points at me, || E flat;  
u u / u u / /u u /  
and although we are not better for it,  
u / u u / u u /  
they tell you to go. || And you do. (22-29)

In the institution, a place removed from the everyday world of the mid-century American “normal,” “the lounge of the mental house” has been remade into a new sort of domestic site that gives these characters—even if they “are not better for it”—a voice, a means of responding to both illness and the aggressions of society. The speaker’s bell is in E flat,

the same note which grounds heroic works, including Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* and Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* (A Hero's Life).<sup>106</sup> Contrary to the male-generated mandates of psychiatric medicine and the dismissive collective epithet "crazy ladies," the speaker is given a noble and dynamic means of using language to catapult herself not only beyond the walls of the institution but into the realm of art and public life. Thus "they tell you to go. And you do" embodies, in the most triumphant way possible, how the poet succeeds at, to quote Middlebrook, "making use of illness" ("1957: Anne Sexton's *Bedlam*" 245).

The last poem in this category—and the one with which I will close this chapter—is one of Sexton's most formally consistent and moving. It describes the institutionalized female body as well as separations and divides, both between mother and child and between the individual and the self (Johnson 84). "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward,"<sup>107</sup> a persona poem, does not take place in an asylum, but its lineage (in an interview, the poet spoke of having "met someone in a mental hospital who'd had an illegitimate child") suggests those connections (Gerald 70). Made up of five roughly iambic eleven-line stanzas of varying length (between three and six feet) and of alternating rhymes (*abababababa*), "Unknown Girl," as with "Her Kind," gives a nod towards oddness with the addition of each extra line that prevents symmetry in the

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<sup>106</sup> "Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 in E Flat Major, Op. 55"; "Ein Heldenleben, Op.40 (Strauss, Richard)"

<sup>107</sup> *Bedlam*.

various stages of the poem. The first stanza presents the speaker directly addressing her newborn, bewildered and enchanted by the hunger that possesses both of them:

(u) /        u / u \ u / u / / /  
 Child, || | the cur | rent of | your breath | is six | days long.  
 u / u / / u \ u / /  
 You lie, || | a small knuck | le on | my white bed;  
 \ / u / u / u / u /  
 lie, fist | ed like | a snail, || | so small | and strong  
 (u) \ u / u / u / uu \ u /  
 at | my breast. || | Your lips | are an | imals; || | you | are fed  
 u / u / / u / u /  
 with love. || | At first hun | ger is | not wrong.  
 u / u / u / uu / u \  
 The nurs | es nod | their caps; || | you are shep | herded  
 u / / \ u / uu / u /  
 down starch | halls with | the oth | er unnes | ted thron  
 u / u / u u / uu / u /  
 in wheel | ing bas | kets. || | You tip | like a cup; || | your head  
 (u) / u \ u / u / u / uu /  
 movi | ng to | my touch. || | You sense | the way | we belong.  
 u / uu / u / u /  
 But this | is an ins | titu | tion bed.  
 u / u / u / u /  
 You will | not know | me ve | ry long. (1-11)

The surrounding environment, cold and unfeeling with its “starch halls,” recalls the “antiseptic tunnel” of “You, Dr. Martin.” At the centre of it all are the girl and the baby, who are bound together in an unspoken intimacy. Sonic emphasis is placed on key images via spondees (“**days long**”; “**lie, fist-**”; **halls with**”) and bacchii (“**a small knuck-**”; “**my white bed**”; “**at first hun-**”). Even as nurses bustle and doctors confer, time has stood still for mother and child. Immediately there is a line drawn between two kinds of mothering.

On the one hand, there is the socially “acceptable” realm of mothering—legitimate children raised in normative nuclear American families—which Sexton was unable to function in. On the other, there is animal mothering, the gut love driven by the deepest impulses of the human organism, what the Imagist poet H.D. describes as “jellyfish consciousness,” connecting with new life through “streamers and feelers” (qtd. in Ronda, 225). Immediately a contrast is established between this organic realness and the institutional world of “enamel” doctors, nurses whose assent is indicated by their nodding caps, and wheeling baskets whose function is to spirit children away from their mothers. But the physical connection endures, at least for a moment. The rising metre lends surety, weaving a lullaby around the intimacy of the animal-mother bond:

/ u u / u / u / u /  
 Yours is | the on | ly face | I rec | ognize.  
 / u u / u / u / u /  
 Bone at | my bone, || | you drink | my ans | wers in.  
 / / u / u /  
 Six times | a day | I prize  
 u / u / u u \ u / u /  
 your need, || | the an | imals of | your lips, || | your skin  
 (u)/ u / u / u / u /  
 grow | ing warm | and plump. || | I see | your eyes  
 / u u / u u / / u u/  
 lifting | their tents. || | They are | blue stones, || | they begin  
 u u / u / u / u u /  
 to outgrow | their moss. || | You blink | in surprise  
 u u / u u / u / u / u /  
 and I won | der what you | can see, || | my fun | ny kin,  
 u u / u u / u / u u / u u /  
 as you trou | ble my si | lence. || | I | am a shel | ter of lies.  
 (u)/ u / u / u / u / u /  
 Should | I learn | to speak | again, || | or hope | less in

\ / u u / u / u / u / u /  
such sa | nity will | I touch | some face | I re | cognize? (23-33)

Behind the tranquility is communication: the baby is able to “drink...in” the answers of the mother and, more problematically, “trouble [her] silence.” In addition to being the “funny kin” that has arrived as if by accident, the baby is—like the inhabitants of the asylum whom Sexton encountered and the first poetry peers she met at Holmes’s workshop—a bearer of language. There is also the suggestion that the individuals in the scene have become their own forms of shelter; the “blue stones” of the baby’s eyes are described as “lifting their tents,” and the troubled but awe-struck mother refers to herself as “a shelter of lies.” Under the roof of the institution, mother and child have constructed their own vital intimacy, as fleeting as it might be. In showing this, the lines of the stanzas expand and contract; there is homogeneity and kinship expressed by the linking of rhymes, but there is (as mentioned) the existence of the “extra,” that which will be cast forth to be taken up somewhere else.

As the poem progresses, the mother is interviewed by the authorities, and the child is named “bastard” (44), that cruel epithet of unbelonging. The final stanza of “Unknown Girl” presents the speaker’s admission that this union born of animal love and language has been, if not hopeless, fatally thwarted. Throughout the poem, it is interesting to note how these lines, as they expand and contract in length, mirroring the rhythms of breath and blood, are splintered by caesurae at every turn. Separation—the dissolution of the

primal bond—hangs in the air. The final stanza of the poem switches into a cooler resolve on the part of the speaker that nonetheless reverberates with heartbreak:

u / / / (u) / u / u /  
 And now | that's that. || There | is no | thing more  
 u / u / u /  
 that I | can say | or lose.  
 / u u / u / u /  
 Others | have trad | ed life | before  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 and could | not speak. || I tigh | ten to | refuse  
 u / u / u / u / u\  
 your ow | ling eyes, || my fra | gile vis | itor.  
 u / u / u / u u /  
 I touch | your cheeks, || like flo | wers. || You bruise  
 u / u / u / / u u /  
 against | me. || We | unlearn. || I am | a shore  
 / u u / u / u / u /  
 rocking | you off. || You break | from me. || I choose  
 u / u / u / u / u\  
 your on | ly way, || my small | inher | itor  
 u / u / / u u / u /  
 and hand | you off, || trembling | the selves | we lose.  
 / / u / u / u / u /  
 Go child, || who is | my sin | and no | thing more. (45-55)

The mother and child must “unlearn” love; to this end, the speaker paints herself as a threat to this “fragile visitor” who threatens to “bruise” in the arms of the transgressing mother. There is an air of applied determination expressed through the march of iambs that predominates (with appropriate trochaic, anapaestic, and spondaic variations). And yet, there remains a reaching for words, for the unsaid. In Line 45, careful scansion

reveals that the third foot actually consists of what I will call “a ghost half-iamb,” a silent half-stressed syllable that should be there to keep the integrity of the line but isn’t:

u / / / **(u)** / u / u /  
And now | that’s that. || There | is no | thing more

It may seem like a stretch to make such conjectures in assessing the metrical template of the poem. Still, this proposed omission—along with the bookend lexical repetition of “more”—would, I believe, make sense in its function of showing the speaker’s consciousness faltering beneath the surface of her resolve in the face of bureaucracy and the dictates of social and medical protocol.

“Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” would be followed, throughout Sexton’s career, by other works that used the baby not as a signifier of familial separation (i.e. the anxiety, guilt, and grief felt by Sexton as she found herself pulled apart from her own children) or as a metaphor for the sick person birthing the vital poet ripe with animal spirit, but as her own death, the consummation of her worst hauntings and appetites. Sexton’s longer free-verse poem “The Death Baby”<sup>108</sup> echoes “Unknown Girl” in its imagery; however it presents itself, in a way, as the first poem’s ominous photographic negative:

1. Dreams  
I was an ice baby.  
I turned to sky blue.  
My tears became two glass beads.

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<sup>108</sup> *DN*.

My mouth stiffened into a dumb howl.  
They say it was a dream  
But I remember that hardening. (1-7)

.....

6. Baby  
I rock. I rock.  
You are my stone child  
With still eyes like marbles.  
There is a death baby  
for each of us.  
We own him.  
His smell is our smell.  
Beware. Beware.  
There is a tenderness.  
There is a love  
For this dumb traveler  
Waiting in his pink covers.  
Someday,  
heavy with cancer or disaster  
I will look up at Max  
and say: It is time.  
Hand me the death baby  
and there will be  
that final rocking. (33-51)

The return of the child, in this case—“the final rocking”—moves against the current of fought-for life and articulates the longing for death, a movement into an unformed nothing that exacts nothing from us. There is, undoubtedly, authenticity and a kind of performative impact in certain examples of Sexton’s later work. However, I believe that her intermittent reliance on form did more than profess a fealty to social convention or a desire to ally with a poetic/academic establishment. Form gives the poet who must handle the uranium of illness, pain, betrayals, and trauma a means of examining and reasserting



relationships in a context which incorporates both containment and dynamism. Form provides a home, a site from which to dream, speculate, and even rebel. In the words of Paul Lacey:

To reach its readers, the poem must persuade us that the truth it tells is worth the price it exacts; it must lead us to appropriate and satisfying reactions. Form operates to say to the reader what it says to Anne Sexton: this is a pattern which allows you to be truthful.” (98)

It would be reductive and grossly judgmental to state that staying within the bounds of metre, rhyme, and stanzaic configurations would have saved Anne Sexton and extended her creative output past its brief span of eighteen years. But, in contemplating those works that relied on “tricks to get to the truth,” the rewards of these techniques made themselves amply evident. They not only show the poet flowering in a technical facility mastered almost osmotically but also give us a framework for sorting, assessing, and reckoning with those demons that hover at our very own doorsteps.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### “Thus with a love / That has to have a Home”: Models, Metamorphosis, and Motherhood in the Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks

Over the course of four charged days in April 1967,<sup>109</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, already comfortable in her reputation as an established and respected poet, attended the Second Annual Writers’ Conference at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. The theme: “The Black Writer and Human Rights.” Her last stop, prior to this, had been at South Dakota State College, where her audience had been ebullient and welcoming; it is worth noting that they had also been overwhelmingly white. On arriving at Fisk, one of the country’s only Black colleges, the shift in climate was immediately palpable. The elder poet stateswoman found herself amongst a sea of proud and politically restless young Black thinkers; Brooks, whom the *Chicago Tribune* had once glowingly named “the real thing,”<sup>110</sup> was given (in the estimation of John Oliver Killens) something of a patronizing introduction that stiffly acknowledged her work and the plaudits heaped upon her (including a Pulitzer Prize). Used to the eager attentions of liberal mixed audiences versed in European models, Brooks was, for a portentous moment in time, out of her element. Fisk would take on monumental significance in the poet’s life and career as one of the fires in which her new consciousness as a writer and citizen would be forged; this was a

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<sup>109</sup> April 21-23, 1967 (Kent 195).

<sup>110</sup> Engle, Paul. “Chicago Can Take Pride in New Young Voice in Poetry.” *Chicago Tribune*, Sunday Edition, 1945 (qtd. in Kent, p. 74).

new moment, and *she* would now have something to learn (Kent 228; Brooks, *Report from Part One*<sup>111</sup> 84).

Brooks had always been an avid and committed member of the Black creative community in her hometown of Chicago; she had warm and fruitful interactions with luminaries such as Langston Hughes, Edward Bland, Richard Wright, and Margaret Walker and had been, in her youth, a valued member of the NAACP Youth Council (Kent 27, 48, 54, 47).<sup>112</sup> Lerone Bennett noted that “Before it was fashionable, she was tone deep in blackness. In the fifties, she was writing poems about Emmett Till and Little Rock and the black boys and girls who came North looking for the Promised Land and found concrete deserts” (qtd. in Kent 228). In spite of this, Brooks’s position was unusual. She had always been viewed—deceptively—by both white and Black demographics as a creative being who had somehow gained manoeuvrability across the colour line; her enthusiastic readership was mixed, largely because she had published with Harper’s (mostly under the guidance of her editor Elizabeth Lawrence) for twenty-six years. The success of early collections such as *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949)<sup>113</sup> had occurred because—in the limited estimation of the American white liberal ethos—she was a fine *American* poet, irrespective of race. Although her poems had concerned themselves with Black experience and the lives of ordinary Black folk, Brooks,

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<sup>111</sup> Referred to hereinafter as RPO.

<sup>112</sup> The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded on February 12, 1909 as a response to the Springfield Race Riots of 1908 (“Our History”).

<sup>113</sup> Referred to hereinafter as *SB* and *AA*.

naturally reticent, thoughtful, and meticulous in her application of technique, had always abhorred the idea of anything that was blindly declarative. Like many in her circle, she shunned the Harlem Renaissance's early tendencies towards the exoticizing of Black culture; likewise, she professed a deep distaste for the making of poems that approached the timbre of propaganda in their unvarnished directness and eschewing of form (Kent 54, 64, 66).

However, these were the late 1960's, and times had changed. Imperatives concerning universality, assimilation, and integration had given way to the influence of the Black Power movement, which advocated active resistance and dissent as well as the adaptation of cultural nationalism (Debo 168).<sup>114</sup> The speakers and activists on hand at Fisk were firmly in line with the tenets of Black Power and its artistic branch, the Black Arts Movement (BAM);<sup>115</sup> their ranks included writers such as John Henrik Clarke and

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<sup>114</sup> The Black Power movement was a Black Nationalist movement that rose to prominence in the late 1960's and peaked in the early 1970's. Its inception occurred in 1966 when Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) used the term "black power" in a speech following the James Meredith Freedom March (Kent 196). Cultural nationalism is defined by Scot Brown as "the view that African Americans possess a distinct aesthetic, sense of values, and communal ethos emerging from either, or both, their contemporary folkways and continental African Heritage"(qtd. in Debo 168).

<sup>115</sup> Seen as the artistic "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (Larry Neal qtd. in "Brief Guide"), the Black Arts movement emerged around 1960 and flourished until about 1970. It aimed to create politically charged work that would examine the experience and lives of Black people and change how they were represented in the arts. Although it incorporated a variety of genres, the movement was best known for the poetry that flourished under its influence; work by poets including Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Don L. Lee, and Sonia Sanchez harnessed new styles of discourse and rhythms that steered away from traditional European forms and instead drew on everyday Black speech, sermons, and traditional songs, as well as jazz and blues ("Brief Guide").

the aforementioned Bennett and Killens, the poets Margaret Danner Cunningham and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), and the editors David Llorens and Hoyt Fuller.

However, what seized Brooks's attention the most was the air of "electricity" that emanated from the Black youth in attendance, transforming the Fisk campus into what Brooks would refer to as "some inscrutable and uncomfortable wonderland" (*RPO* 84-85). And thus it was that Gwendolyn Brooks, the gifted poet from Chicago's South Side who had managed to tread delicately between two worlds and realities, found herself seized by "*agapeness*," on fire from the ideas and energies swirling around her:

I didn't know what to make of what surrounded me, of what with hot sureness began almost immediately to invade me. I had never been, before, in the general presence of such insouciance, such live firmness, such confident vigour, such determination to mold or carve something DEFINITE. (*RPO* 85)

In reality, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the Fisk Conference was a point on a continuum of increasing consciousness (and subsequently more overt articulation) on Brooks's part, rather than existing as *the* "lightbulb moment"; the poet herself, in an interview from 1983, had named her 1960 collection *The Bean Eaters*<sup>116</sup> as being the work that "was a turning point 'politically,' if you want to use that much-maligned word" (qtd. in Thorsson 155). But she had also characterized Fisk as bringing about a Damascene conversion which had far-reaching consequences, both in terms of her practice and her approaches to the domestic and the act of belonging. The forms that had

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<sup>116</sup> Known hereafter as *BE*.

hitherto governed her life—physical, textual, moral, social, and existential—would undergo a sea-change that would symbolize not a total rejection of order but, rather, a *reimagining* of order aligned with the need to “respond to her climate” (Kent 153; Hansell 63).

Brooks’s presence in this dissertation has marked significance. She was the only member of our triad of poets to have been held captive in the grip of systemic racism and subjected, in spite of her talent, renown, and laurels, to discrimination and confrontation.<sup>117</sup> From a socioeconomic standpoint, she lacked both the inherited wealth and privilege afforded to Bishop and Sexton—for her, there were no Modernist properties in the mountains of Brazil, nor picture-perfect houses on leafy New England streets, nor lengthy sojourns in Florida or Paris, nor access to private psychiatrists. And yet we see, at the start of Brooks’s life and career, a deeper rooting in both conservative domestic values and belief in the integrity and effect of poetic craft (including form). With the seismic ideological and spiritual upheaval of 1967 came a radical propulsive shift towards the championing of what she called “the New Black”—the proud and defiant archetype of African-Americanness that would refute white-generated nomenclature, including words like “negro” and “coloured” (Angela Jackson 95). Whites, including earnestly liberal whites who professed solidarity and offered political and professional support, were to

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<sup>117</sup> Discrete incidents include Brooks’s being turned away in November, 1949 from the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in New York, where her erstwhile poetry mentor Inez Cunningham Stark was staying and Wallace Stevens’s reaction (“Who let the coon in?”) to her winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* in 1950 (Kent 88; Major Jackson, “Wallace Stevens ‘After Lunch’”).

have no part in this new movement (*RPO* 137). After 1967, Brooks moved exclusively to Black publishers. The work of this period took up the cause of giving voices to inner city children and gang members, as well as the “ordinary” folk she had described in her previous books of poetry and her 1953 novel *Maud Martha*. Furthermore, it posited the continent (and concept) of “Afrika” as a logical homing point for Blacks the world over, not least of which those from the United States.<sup>118</sup> The very form of the image of home had changed for Brooks; as for her professed rejection of European forms, the decision was vocal and definitive:

I observe ... too many little indications that some of our singing brothers and sisters, in the worrying grip of current frustrations and vagueness, are willing to settle for "the pretty little thing," the handsome harmony, the obscure conundrum. I like prettiness, I like music, I like games and puzzles. But I don't think we Black poets can afford to forget what, in 1967, 1968, 1969, we bravely decided we are about. The issues remain too large; the threats continue; the sewers deepen, and reach for us with an ever more ravenous hunger. (qtd. in Hansell 63)

It is my intention to explore how Brooks’s handling of the domestic and poetic form altered with both the pressures of the changing times and the new consciousness and attendant aims which seized her as both an artist and a person. To this end, this chapter will look at Brooks’s approach to domesticity and form through three distinct lenses.

Firstly it will examine the **models** that Brooks strove to attain and appropriate, both in

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<sup>118</sup> In “Signifying Afrika: Gwendolyn Brooks’s Later Poetry”, Annette Debo points out how, in her 1969 collection *Riot*, Brooks elected to use the Kiswahili spelling (with a “k”) which creates a tie between the poet’s writing and the African language and provides a symbolic centre for Blackness. Debo adds that “Afrika also designates the mass of the diaspora, signifying the size and breadth of their numbers and power as they themselves become a continent” (168-169).

terms of “perfect,” stable housing and socio-domestic practices and, in her poetry, formal meticulousness—as well as how these models shifted and/or fell away and were replaced by others as she came into a new awareness of her place in the world and her role as poet and citizen. Secondly, it will look at the **metamorphosis** which takes place within domestic spaces/contexts in Brooks’s poetry, embodied by changes in perception, battles for power, infractions of social, racial, and generational expectations, as well as the transforming potential of dream and memory, and unpack how this is represented within the poetic line and the field of the poem in general. Finally, it will discuss the status of **motherhood** to show the way in which Brooks’s use of poetic form reflects how the role of mother/carer is performed within racialized (and non-racialized) domestic environments, how it informs and survives incidents of oppression and violence, and how it becomes reinvented in the light of generating resistance and seeking racial solidarity.

Brooks was a perfectionist regarding technique; as her career progressed, this spirit of perfectionism morphed from a strict adherence to European formal templates into a complex and lush (and occasionally impenetrable) floridity,<sup>119</sup> and finally into the use of deconstructed forms—largely free verse with jazz-inflected rhythms and rhyming patterns—which strove to capture Black voices and address Black experiences. Something of a prodigy, she had produced, by the age of seventeen, a substantial body of work that harnessed a range of forms, largely traditional, with a few forays into looser structures. Work from this period pays homage to poets including Byron, Teasdale, and Dickinson,

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<sup>119</sup> *Annie Allen* (1949) embodies this shift in Brooks’s style.



sometimes to cumbersome effect (Kent 3). On the advice of James Weldon Johnson,<sup>120</sup> Brooks began to whittle away at the volume of superfluous archaic devices in her poems, such as inversion, stilted diction, and line-wrenching—making a line’s length fit the “numbers.” Johnson counselled her to avoid sentimentality; he pointed her instead toward the Modernists (including e.e. cummings, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound), a body of influence that Brooks’s subsequent poetic mentor Inez Cunningham Stark would also promote heavily (Kent 26). This advice stuck; as an adult poet, Brooks would “rumple” her lines with Modernist inflections, playing with line length, word music, and imagery, even as her poems maintained the contours of elevated formal work bearing all the telltale signs of European poetic influences. In later years, this adherence to form would be regarded as a regrettable indicator of Brooks’s early indentured servitude to white aesthetics and approval; Don L. Lee (later Haki Madhubuti)<sup>121</sup> notes, in his preface to *Report from Part One*, that “at times the force of her poetic song is strained in iambic pentameter, European sonnets and English ballads” (14). However, I feel that these works, rather than seeming “strained,” wear their limitations and assigned music appropriately, as they mirror to the reader/listener the longing for protective spaces, ownership of the physical and emotional self, and lives marked by agency and autonomy. The work that followed, radically

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<sup>120</sup> Johnson was a well-established poet and novelist, who had been instrumental in the Harlem Renaissance; he was also an influential figure in the Civil Rights movement. At the time of his communication with Brooks, he was serving in the role of executive secretary of the NAACP (Kent 26).

<sup>121</sup> As this name change would not occur until 1974, I will be using the name Don L. Lee in this chapter.

deconstructed and reconstituted to reflect idioms of Black identity and discourse, shows us not a removal from form but the process in which Brooks was using it to adapt to new models, currents of change, and the concept of greater family and the protection of youth. My goal in this tripartite approach is to demonstrate how Brooks's use of the poem-space, at all stages of her career, echoes bell hooks's concept of "homeplace"—the locus that exists as "a site of resistance and liberation struggle" for Black people. In hooks's words:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack) had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world (42).

This idea is expanded upon by Courtney Thorsson, who points out that, prior to the second-wave feminist clarion call "the personal is political," the personal was *always* political for Black women, not least of whom were those who, from slavery times onward, were pulled into the public sphere to engage in domestic labour away from their own personal and protected spheres of influence (152; hooks 42). Thus it is that the notion of homeplace takes on added import and contributes resonance to the comparison of physical domestic spaces and activities with the use of poetic form. If we examine how Brooks turns form into a kind of homeplace—positing and debunking models, representing internal transformations, and showing how the form itself holds and cares for

its subjects (as well as represents those in caring roles), we can see how form is not something that has to be undone and cast aside, but rather something that, pending adaptation, possesses the innate potential to inspire resistance and change.

“I’ve stayed in the front yard all my life”: Model Homes, Model Lives

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in 1917, not in the Chicago she loved and celebrated (and which would celebrate her) but in her mother Keziah’s hometown of Topeka, Kansas.<sup>122</sup> Both Keziah and Brooks’s father David had previously set their caps on more illustrious careers; Keziah, a schoolteacher back in Kansas, had once dreamed of becoming a concert pianist, while David, a transplant from Oklahoma, had begun and abandoned medical studies at Fisk—the same university which would loom so large in his daughter’s destiny. Black mobility was starkly limited in America at this time, and the situation in Chicago was no exception. As a young woman, Keziah had worked in domestic service while David secured what would become a thirty-year position as a porter with the McKinley Music Company. After living in a series of apartments, an act of violence against Keziah propelled the family to embark on a major undertaking: the purchase of a home. And, in this regard, they were lucky. Nestled on a clean, leafy street with well-kept lawns, the Brooks’ home at 4332 South Champlain was neat and welcoming, with porches out front and back (Kent 2-3).

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<sup>122</sup> A son, Raymond, would follow in 1918.

This childhood quasi-idyll would haunt Brooks into her young adulthood. In 1937 she was twenty and actively engaged in the NAACP Youth Council when, one night, at a gathering at the YMCA, her fate collided with that of a certain Henry Lowington Blakely II. A “dignified” and bookish young man, he had come in search of “a girl who wrote” (Kent 44). Brooks and Blakely embarked on a two-year courtship which culminated in their marriage in 1939 and a move to the decidedly unappealing Tyson Apartments on Forty-Third and South Park. Following this, they lived in a series of cramped kitchenette apartments which were, in their dimensions and privations, light years away from the relative comfort Brooks had enjoyed as a child.<sup>123</sup> Like her parents before her, Brooks ached to experience the sense of permanence and pride of owning a house; following the birth of her daughter Nora in 1951,<sup>124</sup> she took to fantasizing about the houses she saw during country drives. Her dream of home ownership in Chicago materialized in 1953 when the Brooks-Blakelys moved into a home of their own on South Evans (Kent 45-47; 104; 117).<sup>125</sup>

At stake for many Black families was the question of safety in an environment where institutionalized prejudice was rife; making a move “upwards” to formerly all-white areas carried with it the looming threat of racist violence. Lorraine Hansberry’s

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<sup>123</sup> This chapter will later examine, in greater detail, the nature of kitchenette living and the effect which its confined perimeters had on Black families, the human spirit, and Brooks’s own poems.

<sup>124</sup> A son, Henry Brooks Blakely III, had preceded her in 1940.

<sup>125</sup> Brooks would stay in the house on South Evans until 1991, when a burglary led her and Henry to purchase a co-operative apartment on South Shore Drive (A. Jackson, 171).

1958 play *A Raisin in the Sun*<sup>126</sup> takes as its subject the ambitious and hopeful Younger family who, after putting a down payment on a home in a changing area, are encouraged by a white neighbourhood representative to accept a substantial sum for not moving to the neighbourhood, lest their presence inflame racist tensions. It is an offer which, in the name of Black pride, the patriarch Walter refuses:

LINDNER (*Looking around at the hostile faces and assembling his hat and briefcase*) Well—I don't understand why you people are reacting this way. What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighborhood where you just aren't wanted and where some elements—well—people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they've ever worked for is threatened.

WALTER Get out. (Act II, Scene 3)

Brooks, who had not yet been swept up in the tides of militancy, still subscribed to the philosophy that courage, determination, and Christian piety were the Black progressive's best weapons and that integration and universality would eventually prevail (Kent 94). She lays out the perils of housing in her 1951 essay "They Call it Bronzeville,"<sup>127</sup> published in *Holiday* magazine, describing unrest but setting out a shaky resolution:

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<sup>126</sup> Brooks, on the invitation of writer and labor organizer Frank London Brown, attended the Chicago opening of *A Raisin in the Sun* and was moved to tears, saying she "could rave about that play forever" (Kent 132).

<sup>127</sup> Otherwise known as the "Black Metropolis" or the "Black Belt", Bronzeville came about in the early part of the 20th Century, in the wake of the onset of The Great Migration, which saw an exodus of Black Americans leaving the South in search of better lives, settling in cramped and under maintained white-owned properties in Chicago's South Side. From there, the district emerged as the city's epicentre of African-American history and culture ("History of Bronzeville").

Because of its cramped housing conditions, Bronzeville keeps stretching, stretching – leaning, cutting farther north, farther south, farther east, farther west. When this happens, violence follows; for a while there are beatings, window smashing, crowd gatherings. In time the active violence subsides (though not the regret) chiefly because it is found that the new, unwanted neighbours maintain their yards, their houses, their children and themselves as well as, if not better than, the old guard had been wont to do. (qtd. in Kent 94)

Her thoughts on the Black quest for stable housing are explored in a more dramatic sense in “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed.”<sup>128</sup> The poem uses the vehicle of the longer traditional ballad to tell the tale of its eponymous doomed hero, a virtuous dark-skinned (“oaken”) Black man whose desire to own a home in a changing area culminates in a tragedy of Grand Guignol proportions.<sup>129</sup> The second through fourth stanzas, combining iambic and anapaestic metre, capture this longing for a home in a narrative which resonates with timeless portent:

u / u / u u /(u)  
“I am | not hun | gry for berries.  
u / u / u u /  
I am | not hun | gry for bread.  
u / u / u \ u /  
But hun | gry hun | gry for | a house  
u u / u / u /  
Where at night | a man | in bed

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<sup>128</sup> *BE*.

<sup>129</sup> In the poem, Reed moves his family into a house in a white neighbourhood. A mob attacks the house, drawing blood from Reed’s young daughter Mabel and sending Reed into a rage. Reed kills several of the attackers with a butcher knife and a firearm and is, in turn, killed and mutilated by the mob. The poem ends with his young daughter weeping with grief and guilt while her mother changes her bloody dressings.

u / u / u / (u)  
”May nev | er hear | the plaster  
(u)/ u / u /  
Stir | as if | in pain.  
u / u / u / (u)  
May nev | er hear | the roaches  
(u)/ u \ / /  
Fall | ing like | fat rain.

u / u / u / u /  
“Where nev | er wife | and child | ren need  
u / u / u /  
Go blink | ing through | the gloom.  
u / u / u / u /  
Where ev | ery room | of man | y rooms  
(u)/ u / u /  
Will | be full | of room. (5-16)

Heavy with repetition and anaphora, these three stanzas maintain a relative degree of metrical regularity, emphasizing the poignancy and urgency of Reed’s situation. Home becomes an entity that promotes the nourishment needed for survival; it becomes one with the individual and those they seek to shelter. In the second of these stanzas, we see a house-body alignment of another kind; the image of the plaster walls “stir[ring] as if in pain” links low-income housing to corporeal suffering. And, in the third, we are witness to architectural (and poetic) space as a breathing body; the wide double-vowel (/u:/) sounds in “gloom” and the repeated “room” open the lines out sonically, virtually providing them with more oxygen. The fifth stanza expands further outwards to show the dream-home as existing in no certain place but possessing a mystical significance:

u u / u / u / u /  
“Oh my home | may have | its east | or west  
u / u / u / (u)  
Or north | or south | behind it.  
(u)/ u / u / u / (u)  
All | I know | is I | shall know it,  
u / u u / u / (u)  
And fight | for it when | I find it.” (17-20)

The metre remains constant here, albeit there are crucial delicate variations. As in the previous stanzas, there is (in Line 19) one incidence of a headless iamb; however, the occurrence of three consecutive extra-syllable endings (“**behind it**”; “shall **know it**”; “I **find it**”) in Lines 18 to 20 has a strong mixed effect. On the one hand, these endings show a “reaching out” from the line towards something that is of life-giving significance. On the other hand, however, they predict a coming out of balance, a tipping over into trouble. What is arresting, in any case, about this stanza is how it presages Brooks’s later identification of a home for Black humanity—Afrika—a place/concept that will be located, known, and fought for, but on a larger scale.

Even within the confines of the kitchenette, Brooks was dedicated to running both her leaky rowboat of an apartment and her poetic practice like a well-organized ship. In an early letter to Lawrence regarding her domestic environment, she explained how she made poems in the midst of “scrubbing, sweeping, washing, ironing, cooking; dropping the mop, broom, soap, iron, or carrot grater to write down a line, or word” (qtd. in Kent 64).<sup>130</sup> Lawrence would eventually visit the Brooks-Blakely abode in 1954 and be

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<sup>130</sup> At the time of the letter, Henry Jr. was about to turn four, which places it at 1944.



delighted by Gwendolyn's "jolly family and...so-pleasing home" (qtd. in Kent 118). In 1963, a feature story in the *Chicago Daily News* was prefaced by a headnote that ran, "Gwendolyn Brooks is at least two women." Who were they?

One is the poet whose slim volumes offer lovely poems of a deceptive simplicity. This is Miss Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize winner, the champion of causes, the writer. This is the woman who claims the quiet daylight moments when her husband is at work and her daughter is in school, to bend over the dining room table to work on an idea, a right word, a rhythm.

The other woman is the wife of Henry Blakely, 46, an insurance adjuster, and the mother of Henry Jr., 22, a Marine stationed in Hawaii, and of Nora, nine. Mrs. Blakely is a good neighbor, worries over her food budget, nudges Nora to eat properly, sees that her husband has enough white shirts to last the week.

The two halves meld in her poetry. The mother and the wife are never apart from the poet in the modest frame South Side home on Evans Avenue. (qtd. in Kent 165)

Order—both in terms of the domestic and literary structure and practice—had been imprinted onto Brooks's consciousness early. The little house on South Champlain was the perfect setting for a childhood marked by love, regimentation, and routine; even with the economic trials of the Great Depression, a sense of order and domestic stability prevailed (Kent 5, 46). Throughout both Kent's biography and her autobiography, Brooks's recollection of domestic rituals is startlingly vivid:

A typical day for the children began at eight or nine—toast or biscuits with butter and jelly, orange juice, applesauce, or bacon and eggs with cereal and juice. ... oatmeal with cream floating on it, graced with butter, sugar, and other additions. ... Lunch was noon or thereabouts—often soup, bread and butter sometimes topped with sugar and applesauce. During the week, dinner might be hamburger patties, pork chops, or lamb chops, and a salad that almost always contained sliced

tomatoes. Sundays probably brought roast chicken, roast lamb shoulder, or leg of lamb.

The children were dressed twice a day. Before they were of school age, they put on rough but clean clothes in the morning so they could play freely, and their hair received the first of the day's combings. After lunch they washed and dressed in nicer clean clothes and Gwendolyn's hair was again combed—their afternoon play was expected to be more restrained. Except for making mud pies, Gwendolyn and Raymond's favorite games during early childhood tended not to be of the dirtying kind. Their favorites outdoors were tag and hide and seek. The indoor family games included checkers, dominoes, jigsaw puzzles, and occasionally whist. (Kent 3-4)

The Brooks household was, in the words of poet and biographer Angela Jackson, as “gentile and orderly as an Elizabethan garden with each stick of furniture, knickknack, doily and child in its place” (16). It succeeded, to some extent, in sheltering Gwendolyn and her brother from the hardships of the Great Depression and the inequities and terrors of an unjust society. Upon entering Forrestville Elementary School at the age of six, however, Gwendolyn was assailed by a new cadre of standards and “acceptable” forms. To be popular at Forrestville, one had to have “sass” or “brass.” One had to be sporty, able to run or ride a bike. One could neither be too rich nor too poor. And one had to have light skin and the attribute referred to cryptically as “good” hair (Kent 5).<sup>131</sup> Gwendolyn,

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<sup>131</sup> The spectre of intraracial colourism would continue to haunt Brooks's early life and career. In 1933, she transferred to the all-black Wendell Phillips High School where colourist prejudice was widespread; this led her to move again to Englewood High School, which had a mixed student body. Four years later, Brooks had a promising letter exchange with *Chicago Defender* publisher Robert S. Abbott regarding a reporter position. Upon meeting Brooks in an interview context, Abbott turned cold, and all prospects of a job dematerialized. Abbott's biographer Roi Ottley reports that Abbot, who had been vigorously dissuaded from practising law in Chicago due to his own dark skin, had a fixation on lighter-skinned women (Kent 25, 41).

shy, bookish, dreamy, and dark, failed on all counts. This discomfort was, as ever, relieved by the oasis of tranquility embodied by the house on South Champlain, as Brooks explains:

Home, however, always warmly awaited me. Welcoming, enveloping. Home meant a quick-walking, careful, Duty-loving mother, who played the piano, made fudge, made cocoa and prune whip and apricot pie, drew tidy cows and trees and expert houses with chimneys and chimney smoke, who helped her children with arithmetic homework... (*RPO* 39)

But young Gwendolyn's own "expert house" also brought with it a surprising revelation that would change her life forever. At the age of seven, she was discovered by her mother in the midst of penning her first poem or, more accurately, a fleet of two-line verses. Keziah was rendered rapt by this discovery, declaring that her eldest would become "the lady Paul Laurence Dunbar" (Kent 1). Immediately the die was cast. Brooks was accorded a degree of space and leniency (spared from chores, save for dishwashing) that facilitated her budding practice (*RPO* 49). By the age of thirteen, she had achieved her first publication, in *American Childhood*.<sup>132</sup> "Eventide" brims with youthful wonder and an overwhelming sense of trust in the saving power of home forces:

u u / / u / u / u  
When the sun sinks behind the mountains  
u u / u u / u u / u  
And the sky is besprinkled with color,  
u u / u u / u / u u /  
And the neighbouring brook is peacefully still,

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<sup>132</sup> October, 1930 (qtd. in Kent 7-8).

u u / u / u / u /  
With a gentle, || silent ripple now and then;  
u u / u / / / / u  
When the flowers send forth sweet odors,  
u u / u u / u u /  
And the grass is uncommonly green,  
u u / u / u u /  
When the air is tranquilly sweet,  
u / u / u u / u /  
And children flock to their mothers' side[s],  
  
u / u / u / u u /  
Then worry flees and comfort presides  
u / / u u / u u / u  
For all know it is welcoming evening.

Comprising of ten loosely iambic lines which vary in length between three and five feet, “Eventide,” with its chime of anaphora and its use of archaic diction, shows how poets such as William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had imprinted themselves on young Gwendolyn’s poetic consciousness (Kent 7). Pastoral imagery—so far removed from the realities of 1930s Chicago—projects a need for tranquility and beauty, as well as an unwavering belief in the moral primacy of the ordered family. Another childhood poem, “A House,”<sup>133</sup> presents the somewhat livelier ménage of an aunt as still being a place of protection:

And often, after evenings fall,  
Gay music comes from here. ~~pours~~  
No matter how much mad rain falls  
Or peals of thunder roll;  
When once inside these friendly doors  
There’s comfort in the soul.

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<sup>133</sup> From Brooks’s childhood notebook *Blue Book of Verse*.

The yard is such a lovely yard!  
Now, someday when I'm grown  
I'll have a house just like this house  
All for my very own. (7-16; qtd. in Kent 14)

The impression one gets in looking at the first part of Brooks's life and writing career is that moral rectitude/correctness seems to be a conduit for joy; the confluence of order and pleasure works, in turn, to generate more pleasure. As a creature who shuttled between two universes—the aggressively colourist realm of school and the tranquil domain of the family home—the young poet applied herself (to use the parlance of Wordsworth) to the business of recollecting emotion in tranquility or, in Kent's words, to “an act of inner communing that gave pure delight or produced results that could be arranged in a form that would give delight” (6). Form—locational, moral, spiritual, and literary—was the key to happiness and possibly to survival. In her 1956 collection for children *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*, Brooks would show the reader how one of her small literary charges, Beulah, is overcome by the emotional effects of domestic/religious order, experiencing an intermingling of duty and rapture at “doing the right thing”:

(u) / u / u / / /  
On | ly hold | your song- | book ||—so!—  
u u / u u / u u /  
With the big | people clos | ing you in,  
u u / u / u u / (u)  
And the org | an-sound | and the sermon  
/ u u / u /  
Washing | you clean | of sin.

u / u / u / u /  
I do | not want | to stay | away.  
u / u / u /  
I do | not think | I should.  
(u)/ u / u / u /  
Some | thing there | surpris | es me:  
u / \ / u /  
It feels | good to | be good. (qtd. in Kent 121)

In this case, the need to “be good” starts out as being an imposed status but becomes an intrinsic component of youthful contentment.

However, the shadow side of social/moral form and regimentation—escape and rebellion—held its own promise of secret joy for Brooks. Early adolescence brought with it not only concealed romantic yearnings but also a sense of restrained, quiet resistance to the rules imposed upon her, mainly by the principled and religious Keziah (Kent 18-19). In one of her many childhood notebooks, the young poet wrote, in a disgruntled comment: “When *I* am grown, *I* will let my children stay outside and talk to other children on a scorching hot night. *Oh, well*. One learns by experience” (qtd. in Kent 11).<sup>134</sup> The ambiguity of the word “experience” leads one to consider both didactic experience—following the example of what it is to be “good”—and worldly experience. Contemplation of the validity and allure of both avenues would wind throughout Brooks’s work; in “a song in the front yard,”<sup>135</sup> the poet proffers a deliciously assured declaration

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<sup>134</sup> *My Fancy Book*, 1931.

<sup>135</sup> *SB*, 1945. Note: Brooks’s earlier titles use all lower-case letters, with the exception of proper names. I have reproduced these faithfully here.

of independence that would have no doubt shocked Keziah to her core. Comprising four stanzas of varying length, the poem unfolds with a ballad's triple-metre lilt and the faint flavour of a child's cautionary tale:

u / u u / \ / u /  
I've stayed | in the front | yard all | my life.  
u / u / u u /  
I want | a peek | at the back  
u u / u u / u u / u / /  
Where it's rough | and unten | ded and hun | gry weed grows.  
u / u / u u /  
A girl | gets sick | of a rose. (1-4)

The first stanza lays out, in alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines, the speaker's strong desire to abandon the cultivated and chaste front yard—the entryway to civilized domesticity—and venture out to the back yard, a realm of wildness and abandon and a signifier of subversion and escape. Amongst the iambs and anapaests, one variation stands out: a bacchius in the final foot of the third line (“-gry **w**eed **g**rows”), giving us a hint of the speaker's timid move into rebellion. Defying the usual sonic model for a ballad stanza, there is full end rhyme connecting not the second and fourth lines but the third and fourth lines, which are mismatched in length. The second stanza presents the speaker growing more assertive and casting her desires even further afield:

u / u / u u / / /  
I want | to go | in the back | yard now  
u / u / u / (u)  
And may | be down | the alley,

u / u / uu / u /  
 To where | the char | ity child | ren play.  
 u / u / / u /  
 I want | a good time | today. (5-8)

The stanza form again features alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines of iambs and anapaests, but the variations have stepped up in number and drum out an emphasis mirroring the speaker’s intention (voiced by the bookending “I want” lines); there is the spondee in Line 5 (“**yard now**”) and another bacchius in Line 8 (“**a good time**”). Furthermore, the extra-syllable ending of Line 6 (“the **alley**”) shows the line venturing just beyond its limits, just as the speaker envisions herself edging out to join the “charity children”—outsiders that threaten the hermetically sealed model home. The spell they cast upon the speaker becomes manifest in the third stanza, which swells in length to eight lines:

/ u u / uu /  
 They do | some wond | erful things.  
 / u u / uu /  
 They have | some wond | erful fun.  
 u / u / u / uu /  
 My moth | er sneers, || | but I | say it’s fine  
 u u / u u u / u / uu /  
 How they don’t | have to go in | at quar | ter to nine.  
 u / u u / uu / u /  
 My moth | er, || she tells | me that John | nie Mae  
 u / uu / u / /(u)  
 Will grow | up to be | a bad woman.  
 u / uu / uu / / u /  
 That George? | ll be tak | en to Jail | soon or late  
 uu / u / / uu / u / /  
 (On account | of last wint | er he sold | our back gate). (9-16)



The opening two lines of the stanza use parallel structure, including initial trochaic variations (“**They** do”; “**They** have”). The anaphora here mirrors the anaphora connecting the third and fifth lines of the stanza (“My mother”), setting up a showdown between the lure of the charity children and the authority of parental forces. Metrical variations include a fourth paeon in Line 12 (“have to go **in**”), the pairing of a bacchius and extra-syllable ending in Line 14 (“a **bad woman**”), a cretic in Line 15 (“**soon or late**”), and two subsequent bacchii in Line 16 (“of **last wint-**”; “our **back gate**”). Furthermore, we see the introduction of caesurae in Lines 11 and 13, signalling that something has inserted itself between the young speaker and domestic authority. The comic (and symbolic) image of young George making off with the back gate gives rise to the eyebrow-raising assertions of the speaker that she would like to try on another sort of Black female existence:

u / u u / / u u /  
 But I | say it’s fine. || | Honest, || | I do.  
 u / u u / u / u u /  
 And I’d | like to be | a bad | woman, || too,  
 u / u / / u u / / /  
 And wear | the brave stock | ings of night | -black lace  
 u / u u / u / u u /  
 And strut | down the streets | with paint | on my face. (17-20)

The stanza pattern has returned to that of the quatrain, albeit the line lengths have evened out to four feet each, conveying a sense of cool-headed resolve. There are more caesurae in Lines 17 and 18 and further punchy variations in the form of a bacchius (“the **brave stock-**”) and a final spondee (“**black lace**”). The louche glamour of the final line gets an

additional flourish via the consonance in “strut,” “streets,” and “paint.” However, like the glamorizing paint, this reimagining of image is just that—an identity that can be tried on and washed off. At the end of the day, the model home remains as it was, even if it is a site of dreams.

In “Sadie and Maud,”<sup>136</sup> Brooks sets up another contrast between two ways of living and throws ironic light onto what it means to stay close to home. We meet two female characters: Maud, who has left home to procure an education but has allied herself firmly with a sense of sterile moral correctness, and her sister, Sadie, who has stayed with her family but has, in terms of her personal choices, “flown the nest” to live large and by her own rules. The narrative, spread out over five quatrains, marches along in a straightforward fashion; as with a child’s nursery rhyme, the base metre is accentual, albeit with a strong trochaic flavour:

      /       /   u   / u  
Maud went to college.  
/ u   /     u   /  
Sadie stayed at home.  
/ u   /     /  
Sadie scraped life  
   u   u   /   /   /  
With a fine-tooth comb.

u    /u     /   u /u /  
She didn’t leave a tangle in.  
u    /     u   /u   /  
Her comb found every strand.

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<sup>136</sup> *SB*.

/ u u / u u / u u /  
Sadie was one of the livingest chits  
u / u /  
In all the land.

/ u / u / u  
Sadie bore two babies  
/ u u / u /  
Under her maiden name.  
/ u / u / u  
Maud and Ma and Papa  
/ u / u /  
Nearly died of shame.

u /u / u / \ /  
When Sadie said her last so-long  
u / / / u /  
Her girls struck out from home.  
/ u u / u /u\  
(Sadie had left as heritage  
u / / /  
Her fine-tooth comb.)

/ u / u / u  
Maud, || who went to college,  
\ u / / /  
Is a thin brown mouse.  
/ u /u / u /  
She is living all alone  
u / / /  
In this old house.

The poem appears to celebrate the “livingest chit” Sadie who, having ventured beyond the bounds of the “good” domestic realm, has managed to perpetuate her spirit in the form of two daughters destined to take up her gift of the “fine tooth comb” and reap the sensual rewards of life. Maud, on the other hand, for all her intellectual ambition and supposed

practicality, has been reduced (conveyed in the poem through a poignant, plinking molossus) to a “**thin brown mouse**” that has effectively been returned to and trapped inside the model she was raised to sanctify. Sonically allied (through another molossus) with “**this old house**,” she becomes one with the containing (and decaying) edifice and thus presents us with a symbol of the anxiety-laden choice concerning whether, as a member of a marginalized group, it is better to conform or to reject conformity.

In “hunchback girl: she thinks of heaven,”<sup>137</sup> we are given another scenario in which the form of the body is held up against that of the home. Brooks presents a young speaker who equates the existence and contours of a perfect eternal “home” with that of an “uncorrupted” physical form. The poem, comprising ten lines of iambic pentameter sprinkled with liberal variations, is written as an appeal either to God or (as indicated by the lack of a capital on “father”) to the human forces that have generated the speaker who deems herself misshapen and irregular. The first six lines defy the usual semantic logic of lyrical poetry; splintered with caesura and spilling into one another via enjambment, they show a mind making sense on its own terms:

u / u / u / u \ / /  
 My fath | er, || it | is sure | ly a | blue place  
 u / / / u \ u / u /  
 And straight. || Right. || Reg | ular. || | Where I | shall find  
 / / u / u u / u / u /  
 No need | for schol | arly non | chalance | or looks  
 u / u / u / u / u / (u)  
 A lit | tle to | the left | or guards | upon the

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<sup>137</sup> *SB*.

(u) / u / / u / u u / u \  
 Heart | to halt love | that runs | without crook | edness  
 u / u / u / u /  
 Along | its crook | ed cor | ridors. || | ... (1-6)

The speaker muses aloud on what heaven must be—in her estimation, a realm that is “blue,” tranquil like the ocean or the sky and yet governed by the geometry of both logic and compassion. In conveying this, Brooks balances the regular with the irregular. The poem thus far lacks the satisfying resolution of end rhyme; however, there are sonic echoes within the lines, transmitted by internal slant rhyme (“Straight. Right”; “heart”/ “halt”), alliteration (“Right. Regular”; “No need”; “little”/“left”; “crooked corridors”), and assonance in conjunction with the /s/ and /r/ consonant sounds. The base metre is interrupted by the directed emphasis provided by spondaic (“**blue place**”; “**Right. Reg-**”; “**No need**”) and bacchic (“to **halt love**”) variations. Movingly, the speaker expounds on the need for a place where the very heart of her being, itself a structure with “crooked corridors,” will not have to stand guard against love perceived to be “without crookedness” and thus undeserved. The poem continues by readdressing the deity/invisible patriarch, imploring him to confirm the speaker’s imaginings about the comforting nature of the afterlife:

u / (u)  
 ... My father,  
 u / u / / / u / u /  
 It is | a planned | place sur | ely. || Out | of coils,  
 u / u / (u) / / \ u / (u u)  
 Unscrewed, || | released, || | no | more to | be marvellous,

u / \ / u / u / u /  
 I shall | walk straight | ly through | most prop | er halls  
 / u u / / u u / u \  
 Proper | myself, || | princess | of prop | erness. (7-10)

In a series of slightly brutal images, the speaker imagines herself wrenched free of irregularity, “Out of coils / Unscrewed, released.” The use of the alliterative phrase “no more to be marvellous” startles the reader/listener, however; there is the sly and ironic acknowledgment, on the part of Brooks, that those characteristics which make the speaker “unfitting” to the terrestrial world also make her unique, worthy of marvel. The nature of the variations shifts accordingly; in addition to the continued insertion of spondees/half-spondees (“**place sure-**”; “**more to**”; “**walk straight**”), the eighth line maintains its five-foot rhythm only if we make allowances for an unspoken unstressed “ghost” syllable to be factored in before the stressed syllable “**no**”:<sup>138</sup>

u / u / (u) / / \ u / (u u)  
 Unscrewed, || | released, || | no | more to | be marvellous,

The poem ends not only with a string of prim plosives (“most **p**roper halls/ **P**roper myself, **p**rincess of **p**roperness”) but also with the new, tentative resolution provided by half end rhymes (“coils”/“halls”; “marvellous”/“properness”). In expounding upon the

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<sup>138</sup> I refer to this, earlier in this dissertation, as a “ghost half-iamb” I acknowledge that scansion is an inexact science and that other readers/listeners may perceive Line 8 to have four strong stresses (e.g. “**Unscrewed, released, no more to be marvellous**”); however, I am following John Hollander’s rule of “the metrical contract” and imagining the line as fitting into the five-foot template (Finch, *A Poet’s Craft* 358-359). It also strikes my ear as being more pleasing when read this way.

concept of a perfect afterlife as a site for bodily difference, Brooks is making a pointed commentary on what constitutes the body that is deemed an acceptable “model,” fit to dwell in model environments. In thinking with this particular poem, one can go further and consider “properness” as a concept which extends to questions of race, class, and gender. Brought to life by a poet who was flanked by interracial intolerance on the one hand and intraracial intolerance (colourism) on the other, the poem’s speaker seems to be enacting a gravitational pull upon the form of the poem itself, bringing it into its own formal perfection as she quietly acknowledges that within her which is marvellous.

As a young darker-skinned Black woman, Brooks had faced her share of discrimination, even as she strove, in her outlook and practice, to uphold an integrationist mindset. Following her post-1967 perspective shift and alliance with the Black Arts movement, however, she would merge her views with that of the zeitgeist and would openly celebrate the house of the Black body:

When I was a child, it did not occur to me, even once, that the black in which I was encased (I called it brown in those days) would be considered, one day, beautiful. Considered beautiful and called beautiful by great groups. I had always considered it beautiful. I would stick out my arm, examine it and smile. Charming! (*RPO* 37)

This turning towards the Black body and the Black collective consciousness began to reflect the way in which Brooks approached the body poetic. Inspired by the young Black poets whom she had encountered and with whom she had begun to interact, she began to

experiment with sloughing off old forms and models. Her 1968 poem “Medgar Evers”<sup>139</sup>

lays out, in no uncertain terms, what is to be done away with:

Old styles, old tempos, all the engagements of  
the day—the sedate, the regulated fray—  
the antique light, the Moral rose, old gusts,  
tight whistling from the past, the mothballs  
in the Love at last our man forswore. (5-9)

The poem—and this excerpt especially—still pulses with the spirit of the pentameter; however, repetition, rhymes, and elements of sound play (alliteration, assonance) are scattered throughout the lines, forsaking the neatness of tidy end rhymes. In describing what is required to build the model home for Black humanity, Brooks allows, in subsequent poems, word and image to spill forth, propelled by jazz rhythms:

Blacktime is time for chimeful  
poemhood  
but they decree a  
jagged chiming now.

If there are flowers flowers  
must come out to the road. Rowdy!—  
knowing where wheels and people are,  
knowing where whips and screams are,  
knowing where deaths are, where the kind kills are.  
 (“Young Afrikans”<sup>140</sup> 3-11)

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<sup>139</sup> Originally published in *In the Mecca*, 1968.

<sup>140</sup> Originally published in *Blacks*, Third World Press, 1987.



The new home, Brooks tells us, is not without music, but the “chimeful / poemhood” must, by necessity, be a “jagged chiming,” one that addresses marginalization, oppression, and ingrained violence. As illustrated by this excerpt, the new model of the poem encompasses internal rhyme (“**Blacktime**”; “**time**”; “**chimeful**”), repetition (“flowers flowers”), alliteration, assonance, and anaphora (“Knowing where”). The voice here is not fanciful or quietly detached but boldly oracular and exhortative.

This is not to say that Brooks’s reshaping of poetic models to reflect new models of home did not make room for tenderness or nostalgia. In *Report from Part One*, the poet dedicates three entire pages to the Brooks household’s elaborate and meticulously planned celebration of Christmas. It is a description which vibrates with exuberance and wistful joy, yet one which leads the poet to muse on the need for Black families to shift their allegiances from an assortment of rituals that keeps them at arm’s length, remembering how “It did not trouble me, then, that Santa was white and Christ and Christmas were offered as white, except for That One of the “wise men,” with role ever slurred, ever understated”(43).<sup>141</sup> The child, encased in the order-seeking, peace-seeking home, is buffered by a force field of regularity and innocence. It is only with hindsight and wisdom—and electrically charged by political awareness—that the home model and its traditions can be reimagined. Brooks asserts, two pages later:

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<sup>141</sup> Brooks’s own son, Henry Jr. was snubbed by a white department store Santa Claus, a traumatic experience which appeared in fictionalized form in her 1953 novel *Maud Martha*.

Yes, needed is a holiday for blacks everywhere, a Black World Day, with black excitement and black trimmings in honour of the astounding strength and achievement of black people. A yearly Black People's Day—akin perhaps to the black concept Kwanza which, based on a traditional African holiday, is considered by many black people an alternative to commercial Christmas; for the week beginning December twenty-sixth, homes are decorated in red and black and green, the black representing the blacknation, the red representing our shed blood, the green featured as a symbol of land for nation-establishment and a symbol, too, for live faith in our young (*RPO* 46).

Three years later, these sentiments would find themselves crystallized in a poem. “Elegy in a Rainbow”<sup>142</sup> comprises two sestets whose lines vary between rough iambic dimeter and trimeter. The first of these stanzas is indeed an elegy for the bright European holiday that the child Brooks thought was hers but wasn't:

u / u u / u /  
When I | was a lit | tle girl  
(u) / u \ u / (u)  
Christ | mas was | exquisite.  
u / u / (u)  
I did | n't touch it.  
u / u / \ / (u)  
I did | n't look | too closely.  
u / u u / (u)  
To do | that to do that  
u / u / u /  
might nul | lify | the shine (1-6)

There is a cautionary energy to this stanza, the implication of an attempted/thwarted approach on the part of the child hinted at by the half-rhyme that connects “exquisite” and “touch it” as well as the repeated “that,” which moves away from that sonic kinship on

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<sup>142</sup> Originally Published in *Beckonings*, Broadside Press, 1975.

account of the difference in vowel sound. The second stanza, on the other hand, turns to the future with greater optimism, predicting a celebration of birth that will be for all Blacks:

(u)/ u u /  
Thus | with a love  
u / u / u /  
that has | to have | a Home  
u u / / (u)  
like the | Black Nation  
u u / / (u)  
like the | Black Nation  
u / u \ / /  
defin | ing its | own roof  
u / u / u /  
that no | one else | can see (7-12)

Replacing the flurry of terse short /i/'s and stopped /t/ sounds (“**l**ittle”; “**e**xquisite”) are a pair of warm /ʌ/ sounds (“**t**hus”; “**l**ove”) and the softness of alliteration involving /h/ (“**h**as to **h**ave a **h**ome”) and /f/ (“**d**efining its own **r**oof”). And, in the dead centre of the stanza, we are given a rhetorical nucleus of sorts, a crucial pair of repeated lines (marked out by a strong double iamb and an extra-syllable ending) that extracts us from the lure of a past marked by a cultural apparatus that has been imposed but offers little promise of total inclusion. The Black Nation that Brooks describes is a logical step forward from the Hunchback Girl, who imagines Heaven as a realm of “proper” rules and sharp angles but quietly nods at her own marvellousness, a self-created heaven *in minutiae*. Such understated alchemy within the poem space—showing shifts in perception as well as the

very nature of domestic spaces—would frequently occur in Brooks’s work, as we shall soon discover.

“New Architecture in Another Morning”: Metamorphosis in the Poem of Home  
and the Home of the Poem

As a woman of colour in mid-20th century America, Brooks had found it advantageous to court a kind of fluidity—to remain flexible in terms of both balancing her approaches to Black and white audiences and handling traditional poetic forms. As this chapter has mentioned already, her experience at the 1967 Fisk Conference, in addition to her subsequent encounters with young Black poets, gave rise to an upheaval in her perspectives and practice. She had always mined Black experience for her source material, but now she conscientiously focussed on honing in on social problems (racist oppression and brutality), and she redirected her attention to an audience that was mixed and inclusive rather than comprising solely elites/academics. The following oft-quoted words from the first volume of her autobiography demonstrate how the poet now aimed to cast her net wide:

My aim, in the next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully 'call' all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones; not always to 'teach' - I shall wish often to entertain, to illumine. (*RPO* 30)

In addition to this, Brooks sought to remove herself from Harpers and the sphere of white publishing in which she had considered herself to be a token asset. She focussed instead on appearing under, and thus supporting, Black-owned and managed imprints (Broadside Press, Third World Press, and her own imprints, David Press and Brooks Press).<sup>143</sup> In terms of her style, she became adamant that form should be an extension of race and culture, wryly noting in a 1979 interview that she believed in “leaving the haiku to the Japanese and the sonnets to the Miltons ... I just feel that Blacks should be trying to develop some Black styles for themselves” (qtd. in Brown et al. 55). The meticulously wrought (but artfully altered) sonnets, ballads and sonnet-ballads were now deemed part of an offensive that had unconsciously alienated Black writers; these gave way, for the most part, to free-verse work that incorporated new jazz-inflected rhythms, shattered rhyme patterns, and featured emphatic instances of repetition and anaphora.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Brooks’s own domestic life mirrored these currents of change. In 1969, she split from Henry in the wake of a domestic dispute involving their daughter Nora, citing unworkable differences in their respective beliefs (Kent 222-224;

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<sup>143</sup> Brooks’s views on creating and/or gravitating towards Black-created and run literary initiatives extended even further; progress, according to Brooks meant a near-complete amputation of Black literary production from bodies of white control. In the interview with Brown and Zorn, she stated, “I still do feel that we should create our own awards and have our own anthologies ... and make of ourselves our own audience, and if we finally do, well they’ll have their white garden and we’ll have our black garden and that’s okay” (52).

Brooks *RPO* 58).<sup>144</sup> The family dynamic shifted further with her deepening intimacy with mentees Walter Bradford and, more dramatically, Lee, who had taken on the role of Brooks's "cultural son" (A. Jackson 171).<sup>145</sup> There was also a marked difference in how Brooks viewed domestic practice; described in lively detail earlier to Lawrence (showing a juggling of priorities that ran parallel to her equally dextrous handling of interracial forms and audiences), it now took a back seat to the greater task at hand. In the aforementioned 1979 interview with Zorn and Brown, the poet noted how it was "not necessary for every 'housewife' to keep the house in apple pie order" (49). The altered domestic practice she now engaged in involved tending to the needs of her new fold of young poets and students; this included feeding them, whether abroad in Dar Es Salaam or at home in Chicago. By this point, Brooks's culinary repertoire had been altered to include more "soul food," including chili and chitterlings—a traditional Southern dish based upon meticulously cleaned and seasoned pork intestines (Jackson 125, 176 109; Brooks *RPO* 127). Food, like poetic form, had now assumed, for Brooks, its own cultural aura. At the end of her free-verse poem "Our White Mother Says We Are Black But Not

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<sup>144</sup> Brooks and Henry would eventually reunite a few years later and travel to Africa in 1974 (A. Jackson 142-143).

<sup>145</sup> Brooks's biological son, Henry Blakely III, who was, by all accounts, scientifically-minded, resentful of the "sheltered life" in the house on South Evans, and not privy to the closer relationship shared by his mother and sister, left home in 1960. He remained essentially estranged from Brooks, although something of a reconciliation occurred prior to her death (Kent 148-149, 184; A. Jackson 181-182)

Very,”<sup>146</sup> the reader is presented with a slightly sinister array of dainty specialties which echoes, ever so faintly, the detailed litany of childhood culinary delights which the poet had described to Kent.<sup>147</sup> The poem's speaker, a bourgeois biracial child named Fleur, expresses disdain for her poorer and darker peers before expounding on that which nourishes the socially mobile creature in denial:

But at Home we'll wait for High Tea.  
Little scones with cinnamon butter,  
salmon croquettes with flakes of green pepper,  
little cucumber sandwiches, cashews,  
sugar in cubes with our English Breakfast Tea.  
Candied ginger.  
And orange juice if we want it. (20-26)

Several of Brooks's later poems, like this one, pluck domestic details, themes, images, and motifs from earlier work and autobiographical recollection and repurpose them to address urgent new concerns and racially, socially, and politically aware and active audiences. In “After School,”<sup>148</sup> we are reminded of the prevalence of a lack of shelter and comfort in many Black homes, qualities that had been so central to the poet's own upbringing in her “expert house”:

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<sup>146</sup> Originally published in *Children Coming Home*, 1991 (hereinafter referred to as *CCH*).

<sup>147</sup> See p. 201 of this dissertation.

<sup>148</sup> *CCH*.

Not all of the children  
Come home to cookies and cocoa.  
Some come to crack cocaine.  
Some come to be used in various manners.  
One will be shot on his way home to warmth, wit, and wisdom. (1-5)

Kent lays out, in his biography of Brooks, how "Gwendolyn and Raymond's favourite games during early childhood tended not to be of the dirtying kind" and how "indoor family games included checkers, dominoes, jigsaw puzzles, and occasionally whist" (4). In "Uncle Seagram,"<sup>149</sup> told from the perspective of a five-and-a-half-year-old boy named Merle, these innocuous pastimes are used as fronts for indoor "games" of the most "dirtying kind," corroding innocence at its very core:

Every night at my house we play checkers and dominoes.  
My uncle sits close.  
There aren't any shoes or socks on his feet.  
Under the table a big toe tickles my ankle.  
Under the oilcloth his thin knee beats into mine.  
And mashes. And mashes. (9-14)

And yet, in these later poems, there are also intimations of safety in reclaimed domestic space. In "My Grandmother is Waiting for Me,"<sup>150</sup> the young speaker muses on the love and succour offered to her by the elder of the title, "Black, and glossy like coal," who plies her with "walnuts and apples" (8-9). The speaker ("Aron") of "To Be Grown Up" reflects on the liberty of a life without report cards and parental authority but reflects

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.



plaintively on the prospect of “No grandmother to fix you big biscuits. / No grandfather to sing you “Asleep in the Deep” (13-14).

Elders—regardless of whether or not they nurture others—are also presented, in Brooks’s later work, as cultivating self-protecting measures, a tendency that is perhaps illustrative of the poet’s own attitudes towards the joint but oft-opposing forces of aging and self-actualization. “Old Woman Rap,”<sup>151</sup> an unusual foray into semi-traditional form for the late-stage Brooks, deftly picks up where the timorously curious speaker of “song in the front yard” left off, laying out an attitude of resignation which still springs from defiance:

u      u / u u \\  
Things are different now.  
/ / /  
I’m not strong.  
u u /u \ / u u /  
I don’t wanna go out in the yard  
u / u /  
To see what’s wrong.

u u / u / /  
I don’t wanna mow grass,  
u u / u /  
For the sun to scorch.  
u u /u /u u /u  
I don’t wanna govern the gutter  
u / u /  
Nor paint the porch.

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<sup>151</sup> Originally published in *Gottschalk and the Grande Tarantelle* (1988; hereinafter referred to as *GGT*).

u / u u / u u /u  
I just wanna curl myself into  
u /u / / u /  
A little-old-woman ball.  
u / u u / u u / u u / u  
Or smile to myself, || or eat cherries or catfish  
u u / / u / u u /  
In a clean room away down a hall.

The speaker, fed up with a life governed by suspicion, surveillance, and fruitless domestic responsibility, seeks the opposite of what the speaker of “song in the front yard” did; the outside world here holds no promise of rebellion through temptingly subversive new friends or an arena for boldness and seduction (think of those “brave stockings of night-black lace”). Rather, the poem proposes a movement inward, presenting, in a witty and honest register, the need to abscond from a world of maintenance and control—performing the actions of the “responsible” adult—and instead feed the small but significant appetites of old age. Poems such as these show the nature of the greater metamorphosis that occurred in Brooks’s life and professional career—how a new social and racial consciousness resulted in a re-calibrating of themes, images, and ideas. However, it is essential also to consider this potential for metamorphosis as it exists on a micro-level, within the physical and formal space of the poem itself. By examining discrete shifts in formal patterns in Brooks’s poems (including her earlier works), the reader is made aware, on a gut level, of the presence of instability and threat, movements towards knowledge/enlightenment, and the possibility of hope and joy that offers a glimmer of transcendence.

During her lifetime, Brooks had intimate relationships with dwelling spaces in her native Chicago, including her childhood home on South Champlain and the house on South Evans, where she lived until 1991. However, she and Henry, prior to moving into their house, had also lived in spaces which were baldly cramped and depressing; four of these had been kitchenettes (Kent 62).<sup>152</sup> In her 1953 novel *Maud Martha*, the poet is unflinching in her description of an environment that evades privacy, cleanliness, and comfort:

And these things—roaches, and having to be satisfied with the place as it was—were not the only annoyances that had to be reckoned with. She was becoming aware of an oddness in color and sound and smell about her, the color and sound and smell of the kitchenette building. The color was gray, and the smell and sound had taken on a suggestion of the properties of color, and impressed one as gray, too. The sobbing, the frustrations, the small hates, the large and ugly hates, the little pushing-through love, the boredom, that came to her from behind those walls (some of them beaverboard) via speech and scream and sigh—all these were gray. And the smells of various types of sweat, and of bathing and bodily functions (the bathroom was always in use, someone was always in the bathroom) and of fresh or stale love-making, which rushed in thick fumes to your nostrils as you walked down the hall, or down the stairs—these were *gray*. (189-190)

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<sup>152</sup> Created from already small (about 600 square foot) apartments that had been carved up into thirds or quarters, kitchenettes were initially marketed to whites as convenient and compact forerunners to today's micro-apartments; features originally included Pullman/Murphy beds, natural light, toilets, and running water. The period that spanned 1940-1960 saw a marked Black population boom, and unscrupulous developers and landlords took advantage of this to generate profit by warehousing Black families at their own peril in substandard conditions. Each family (often multigenerational) had to share a single bathroom with other families on the same floor; amenities were limited to a small stove and an icebox refitted into closet space. Landlords wasted little thought on renovations or hygiene conditions; as a result, the kitchenette phenomenon exacted a severe toll on the physical and emotional health of Black tenants (Morris).

In Brooks’s oft-anthologized “kitchenette building” (which, as part of her first collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*, preceded *Maud Martha* by eight years), we see and absorb the wretchedness of kitchenette life from the perspective of a detached but compassionate insider. Comprising four stanzas (three tercets and one quatrain), the poem lays out, in clear, measured language, how the reality of oppressive spaces impinges upon the human need to dream and hope. The first stanza is near-chaotic in its diversion from the (roughly iambic) base metre:

u u / u / / u u u / u / u /  
 We are things | of dry hou | rs and the invol | untar | y plan,  
 / u u / / u u / u \ / /  
 Grayed in, || and gray. || “ Dream” makes | a gid | dy sound, || not strong  
 u / / u u / /u/ u u /  
 Like “rent,” || “feeding | a wife,” || “satisfy | ing a man.” (1-3)

As racialized inhabitants of such environments are unable to control what happens in the day—let alone the future—so the reader/listener cannot count on the solid predictability of the metre. The first line begins with the common variation of an anapaest which is then followed by a bacchius and what appears to be a fourth paeon with an added unstressed syllable (“-rs and the invol-“). This “fifth paeon,” for want of another term, allows the line to rustle with impatience and frustration.<sup>153</sup> The only factor that can be counted on is

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<sup>153</sup> I am basing my scansion of this line on Brooks’s own midwestern pronunciation of “hours” as being two syllables. For those who pronounce “hours” as one syllable, the scansion would read:

u u / u / / u u u / u / u /  
 We are things | of dry hours | and the invol | untar | y plan,

the monochrome bleakness of the kitchenette; its heaviness is transmitted through the repetition of “gray,” along with the forceful emphasis of trochaic substitutions in the second and third lines (“**Grayed** in”; “**Dream**’ makes”; “**feeding**”), a spondee (“**not strong**”) and a cretic “**satisfy**”). The effect, especially when combined with four caesurae, is one of disorder, along with a stern reminder as to what holds sway. And yet, in the second stanza, a metamorphosis of sorts takes place:

u / u / / / u / u /  
 But could | a dream | send up | through on | ion fumes  
 u / u / uu / u / u / (u)  
 Its white | and vi | olet, || fight | with fried | potatoes  
 u / u u / u / u u \ u /  
 And yes | terday’s gar | bage rip | ening in | the hall,  
 / u u / u / uu / \ /  
 Flutter, || or sing | an ar | ia down | these rooms (4-7)

Viewed with wistful skepticism as “giddy,” the dream nonetheless seems to commandeer the metre in this stanza, which has been extended by a line. Save for a spondee in Line 4 (“**send up**”) and an initial trochee and half-spondee in Line 7 (“**Flutter**”; “**these rooms**”), the metre adheres to a base pattern that is solidly rising—iambes mixed with anapaests. The impression is one of lightness, of being made to hover above the murk and despair, even for a moment. Like Emily Dickinson’s bird metaphor in “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers - 314”, the dream has momentarily “perch[ed] in the soul” of the speaker.<sup>154</sup> The

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<sup>154</sup> Brooks was greatly inspired by the works of Dickinson. Early proof of this can be found in the “News-Review”, the homemade newspaper she mimeographed and distributed herself in 1937 and which included, amongst its many features, inspirational quotes from Dickinson (Kent 38, 41-42).

third stanza continues to marvel at the dream; however, a note of trepidation enters the proceedings, as the speaker frets for its very survival:

/ u u / u / u u / u /  
 Even | if we | were wil | ling to let | it in,  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 Had time | to warm | it, || keep | it ve | ry clean,  
 u / u \ u / u / u u /  
 Anti | cipate | a mes | sage, || | let | it begin? (8-10)

The speaker speculates on the dream’s potential existence as a living thing that needs to be nurtured and loved in this imperfect domestic environment; their discourse, comprising largely parallel clauses, shows them reaching for hope and yet tabulating the cost of keeping such hope alive. The rising nature of the metre continues to make itself heard, its direction varied only by an initial trochee (“**E**ven”) in Line 8 and a medial trochee (“**l**et it) in Line 10. As luck would have it, the spell enacted upon the speaker and the poem’s form is destined to be broken in the final stanza:

u / u u / / / u u / (u)  
 We won | der. || But | not well! || | not for | a minute!  
 u / u / u / u u / u /  
 Since Num | ber Five | is out | of the bath | room now,  
 u / u / \ / u / u u / (u)  
 We think | of luke | warm wat | er, || hope | to get in it. (11-13)

Line 11 brings the speaker crashing back to earth with a jarring shift in rhythm—two caesurae, along with the inclusion of two exclamation marks, a bacchius (“**B**ut **not well!**”), and a medial trochee (“**n**ot for”), collectively snap their imaginary fingers in the

reader/listener's face (and ear), reminding them of the privations of the kitchenette life. A delicate whiff of irony persists through the remaining two lines in terms of the metre, which reasserts itself as constant and rising (iambs and anapaests) and yet is used to describe how "Number Five"—which could refer to the speaker's fifth child or the tenant(s) in another kitchenette on the same floor—has left the bathroom free. A new "dream" awaits the speaker, as lukewarm and sullied as the old bathwater. In a dwelling such as this, in a racialized world of systemic inequality, this is the best luxury that can be wished for.

With *Annie Allen*, the book which won Brooks the Pulitzer Prize in 1950, the poet's practice moved into a phase which appeared lusher and more complex in its use of formal structures, imagery, and syntax. Amongst Brooks's transforming innovations here was her invention of the sonnet-ballad. Elizabeth Lawrence (with whom the poet now shared an easy professional familiarity) reacted to the new stylistic intricacies with some apprehension, as is shown through this communication from July 14, 1948:

It seems to me that this present collection shows you in transition. A Street in Bronzeville was clear, decisive writing with the emphasis on content rather than form. In many of these new poems, on the contrary, the form, the mannerisms, tend to intrude and obscure the content. There is a preciousness, an artificiality, about some of it that is foreign to you as I know you. Perhaps this is necessary to the process of development, and as you find your new direction the superficialities will be pruned away. But for the moment you often put a burden on the reader that is not commensurate with the rewards. You are too good a poet to have to resort to trick and shock devices. (qtd. in Kent 77)

Later Black critical audiences would find *Annie Allen* remote and wanting for somewhat different reasons. In his preface to *Report from Part One*, Lee does not mince words in offering up his estimation of his mentor and cultural mother's second collection, saying, "*Annie Allen* (1949), important? Yes. Read by blacks. No. *Annie Allen* more so than *A Street in Bronzeville* seems to have been written for whites" (17). Lee's primary concern was that Brooks had allowed herself to explore Black themes but within the matrices of inaccessible assumed forms, making the venture essentially irrelevant:

Annie Allen is an important book. Gwendolyn Brooks' ability to use their language while using their ground rules explicitly shows that she far surpasses the best European-Americans had to offer. There is no doubt here. But in doing so, she suffers by not communicating with the masses of black people. (19)

As history has shown, Brooks's views on form would come to align themselves more closely with those of Lee, but her work on *Annie Allen* would prove an important part of her oeuvre, one which greatly challenged and engaged the poet during its making.<sup>155</sup>

Divided into two parts ("Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood" and "The Womanhood"), *Annie Allen* follows the eponymous main character, clever but prone to fancies and dreams, through her life, onwards into the "gray" realm of kitchenette life and romantic disappointments, before arriving at a place where she can acknowledge the toll of her suffering, "cruelty, metal, public, uncomplex," and yet call on the powers that be to

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<sup>155</sup> In an interview with George Stavros, Brooks said, of "The Anniad", "What a pleasure it was to write that poem!" (12) Similarly, she confided to Gloria Hull that, in writing this "extensive experiment", she "enjoyed being passionate" although she considered it to be "just an exercise, just an exercise" (32).



“[o]pen [her] rooms, let in the light and air. / Reserve [her] service at the human feast. / And let the joy continue” (XV 23; 8-10). The initial poem, “the birth in a narrow room,” is made up of sixteen lines of varied iambic pentameter (with one tetrametrical line). It presents Annie’s birth, an event marked by a contradictory aura of vividness and mystery:

/   u   u   /   u   /   u   /   u   /  
 Weeps out | of west | ern count | ry some | thing new.  
 /   u   u   /   u   /   u   \   u   /  
 Blurred and | stupen | dous. || Want | ed and | unplanned.  
       /        /        u   /   u   /  
 Winks. || Twines, || and weak | ly winks  
 u   /   u   /   /   /   /   /   u   /  
 Upon | the milk-| glass fruit | bowl, || ir | on pot,  
 u   /   u   /   u   /   /   u   u   / (u)  
 The bash | ful chi | na child | tipping | forever  
 (u)/ u   /   u   u   /   u   /   u   / (u)  
 Yel | low ap | ron and spil | ling pret | ty cherries. (1-6)

The child who has been born here is immediately situated amongst the anonymous statistics of marginalized lives, denied, as Julia Clausen points out, pronouns identifying gender or even personhood; rather, the unknown entity, this “something new” who has been “Wanted and unplanned,” expresses itself through its limited actions and fuzzy observations (“Confinement of the New”). The reduction in the length of Line 3 shows the subject’s frailty and smallness as it attempts to interact with the world. The choice of the word “weeps” is a curious one; an infant might be assigned the verb “wails” or “cries,” but “weeps” implies sorrow and inconsolability. However, it also finds kinship in an alliterative sense with “western,” “wanted,” “Winks,” “weakly,” and “Twines.”

Superimposed on this is another alliterative pattern involving the use of the voiced plosives /b/ and /p/. Immediately we sense the contrast between the slight breathy push of the /w/ consonant and the punchy plosive—there is greyness and anonymity, but something is working against the gloom, making its vitality felt. In terms of metre, the base pattern is interrupted by two initial trochees and one medial trochee (“**Weeps** out”; “**Blurred** and”; “**tipping**”) and three spondees (“**Winks. Twines**”; “**glass fruit**”; “**bowl, ir-**”). Furthermore, the fifth and sixth lines of the stanza, with their extra syllable endings and the skip of one anapaestic variation (“forever”; “-ty cherries”; “-on and **spill**”), lend a sense of cheerful imbalance; in spite of the privations of this space that will haunt the child, there is a promise of abundance. What kind of abundance is it? The second part of the poem shows us:

u / u / u / u / u /  
 Now, || weeks | and years | will go | before | she thinks  
 u / u / u / / u u /  
 "How pinch | y is | my room! || | how can | I breathe!  
 u / u / u \ u / u /  
 I am | not an | ything | and I | have got  
 u / u \ u / u \ u /  
 Not an | ything, || | or an | ything | to do!"—  
 u / u / u u \ u / u / (u)  
 But pranc | es nev | ertheless | with gods | and fairies  
 / u u / u / u / u /  
 Blithely | about | the pump | and then | beneath  
 u / u / \ / u / u u / (u)  
 The elms | and grape | vines, || then | in darl | ing endeavor  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 By priv | y foy | er, || where | the screen | ings stand  
 u / u / / \ u / u /  
 And where | the bugs | buzz by | in pri | vate cars

u / / / / u / u /  
Across | old peach | cans and jel | ly jars. (7-16)

The room's dank limitations are made real; the medial trochee in Line 7 fronting the phrase "**how** can I breathe!" is effective—chillingly so to the reader of today who contemplates it in the light of 21st-century violence against Black Americans.<sup>156</sup> The "boxing in" effect continues with the triple repetition of "anything." Space threatens to enclose the child, but then there is the hint that something may and can metamorphose and offer a glint of freedom. Imagination becomes that which (at least temporarily) delivers the child from her predicament, as she "prances" with supernatural beings and imagines "in darling endeavour" that the insects that hover around dirty fruit jars are being driven to and fro, "in private cars" like tiny millionaires. Again, the use of extra-syllable endings and anapaestic substitution ("and **fairies**"; "**endeavor**"; "-**ertheless**") shows a movement towards fancy and escape on the part of the young Annie. Lines 15 and 16 appear to ground the reader/listener in the more ominous concrete realities of the situation; two spondees ("**buzz by**"; "**old peach**") and one cretic ("**cans and jel-**"), along with the generally blunted staccato feel of the ultimate line, direct our attention, through focussing on the empty cans and jars. There are the soiled food containers; there are also, of course, the greater dirty containers (inadequate housing spaces and the greater

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<sup>156</sup> I refer here to the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the hands of white police officer, Derek Chauvin. Chauvin killed Floyd by applying pressure with his knee to his neck, leading Floyd to tell officers "I can't breathe" a total of twenty times (Singh).

container of systemic racism) that encase Annie and determine her future. Thus it is that the minor metamorphosis which occurs here is a fleeting one that sets off not only Annie's future disappointments and degradations but also her final grounded resolve to wearily survive and "let the joy continue."<sup>157</sup>

The titular figure in "Matthew Cole"<sup>158</sup> is, like Annie Allen, confined to the "dirty container" of a substandard domestic arrangement; however, age and socioeconomic circumstance, along with race, have relegated him to the further fringes of social consciousness. The "pinchy" nature of Annie's birthplace is evoked in the first sixteen-line stanza, comprising short, terse, roughly iambic lines that drive home the bareness of Cole's existence:

/    u    u    /  
Here are | the facts.  
u    /    u    /  
He's six | ty-six.  
u    /    u u    /    /    u    /  
He rooms | in a | stove-heat | ed flat  
/ u    u    /    u    /  
Over | on Laf | alette.  
u    u    /    \    /    /    /  
He has roomed | there ten | years long.  
u    /    u    /    u    /  
He nev | er will | be done  
u    /    u    u    /    u    /  
With dust | and his ceil | ing that  
u    /    u    /    u    /  
Is ev | erlast | ing sad,

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<sup>157</sup> "XV" (AA).

<sup>158</sup> SB.

u u / u / (uu)  
 And the gloom | y housekeeper  
 u u / u / u / (u)  
 Who forgets | to build | the fire,  
 u u / / / u u /  
 And the fat | red roach | es that stroll  
 \ u / \ u /  
 Una | fraid up | his wall,  
 u u / u / u u / (uu)  
 And the white | less grin | of his housekeeper  
 u / uu / u u / u /  
 On Sat | urday night | when he pays | his four  
 / u u / u / u /  
 Dollars, || | the cease | less Sun | day row  
 u u / / / (uu)  
 Of her big | cheap radio...(1-16)

Brooks does not take the focus off her main character and his plight; there is a proliferation of “he” pronouns, particularly at the start of the lines. The reader/listener picks up on the presence of rhyming couplets; however, these are slant rhymes that ironically combine a sense of finality with one of misfitting. Cole has lived in this room for ten years, and Brooks makes us amply aware of the unendingness that has ground him down and grinds down others like him. There is heavy enjambment, the repetition of the initial conjunction “And” and, save for one instance in Line 15, a near-total absence of caesurae, recalling Annie Allen’s struggle for breath in “The Birth in a Narrow Room.” The lines expand and contract between two and four stresses, giving off a sense of chaos and monotony; this room (like the poem-space) neither cares for him nor offers the pleasures of beauty or symmetry. The metrical variations play into this effect; spondees (“stove heat”; “years long” “-fraid up”; “cheap rad-”) illuminate discrete examples of

the squalor, while double-extra-syllable endings in Lines 9, 13, and 16 do the delicate but effective work of showing us those appendages that are unnecessarily “extra”—the annoying radio and the glum housekeeper with the “whiteless grin” who leaves the room cold but paradoxically speaks warmly of the tenant:

u / u / u u / u u /  
 She'll tell | you he | is the pleas | antest man—  
 / u u / u / u /  
 Always | a smile, || a smile...|| But in  
 u / / / u u \ u /  
 The door-| locked dirt | iness of | his room  
 u / u / u / \ /  
 He nev | er smiles. || Except | when come,  
 / / u u / u / / u u /  
 Say, || thoughts | of a lit | tle boy lic | orice-full  
 u / u / u u / u /  
 Without | a nick | el for Sun | day school.  
 u / u u / u / / u /  
 Or thoughts | of a lit | tle boy play | ing ball  
 u / u u u / u u / u /  
 And swear | ing at the sound | of his moth | er's call.  
 (u) / u / u / u /  
 Once, || I think, || he laughed | aloud,  
 u / u u / u u / u /  
 At thought | of a wond | erful joke | he'd played  
 u u / / u / /  
 On the | whole crowd, || the old crowd... (17-27)

In this shorter stanza, we are briefly returned to the image of Cole as being immolated in the misery of “door-locked dirtiness” which haunts so many of Brooks’s domestic environments. But here, a curious and heartbreaking change occurs. The line length expands to a constant four feet, and we see an increase in the number of anapaestic

variations, a phenomenon which appears in the last six lines of the previous longer stanza (“who forgets”; “and the **fat**” “—es that **stroll**”; “and the **white**”; “of his **house**”; “-urday **night**”; “when he **pays**”; “of her **big**”); in the second stanza, we find no fewer than ten (including one half-anapaest), along with the insertion of a fourth paeon (“-ing at the **sound**”), and three bacchii. The blunted, ragged feel of the rhythm of the previous stanza has given way to a sort of floating dreaminess. Cole’s consciousness has been momentarily altered by memory; his recollections of play, begrudgingly acknowledged parental care, and merriment allow him to be temporarily removed from his confines; the insertion of spondaic (“**when come,/ Say, thoughts**”; “**whole crowd**”) and bacchic (“the **old crowd**”) variations—the first category having been previously used to point out what is abhorrent and heavy and unending—is now applied to those desperately clung-to indicators of better times. The result is poignancy and pathos, mixed with the impression that Cole has found the power to transcend that which contains him. That we are able to escape with him on the wings of the metre allows us to share in the exhilaration of his — and Brooks’s—defiance.

Fifteen years after the publication of *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks would revisit the theme of elders in marginalized spaces, as well as that which allows them to transform their existences through memory. In “The Bean Eaters,”<sup>159</sup> we encounter an elderly couple who, like Matthew Cole, have been shunted to the perimeters of society. The poem follows them as they sit down to the plainest of suppers:

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<sup>159</sup> *BE*.

u / / / u u / / u /  
 They eat beans mostly, || this old yellow pair.  
 / u \ u / u \ u /  
 Dinner is a casual affair.  
 / / \ u u / u / u /  
 Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,  
 / / \  
 Tin flatware. (1-4)

In the first stanza, the bareness of the dinner ritual is mirrored by Brooks’s use of an uneven accentual pulse that nevertheless manages to keep an air of musicality. The vowel sound /eə/ is repeated consistently, along with the words “plain” and “ware.” The latter homophonically brings to mind the verb “wear”—to grind down. The wood on which they have set their food is described as “creaking”; the mention of “flatware”—cutlery—inhabits a truncated line that rings out as a molossus with a half-stress at the end. Like the more conservative (and arguably less fortunate) sister in “Sadie and Maud,” this couple seem to have taken on the physical qualities of what surrounds them. Life, and the inequities of a racially-divided America, have rendered them “plain,” “creaking,” “flat,” and worn-out. However, as with the second section of “Matthew Cole,” the line length and metrical pattern of the second stanza even out into something that resembles uniformity:

/ u u / u /  
 Two who | are Most | ly Good.  
 / u u / u /  
 Two who | have lived | their day,



u / u / u / u /  
But keep | on put | ting on | their clothes  
u / u / u /  
And put | ting things | away. (5-8)

The sing-song cadence of the stanza's iambic trimeter base metre, along with its use of anaphora and repetition, conveys the idea of the comforts inherent to maintaining routine in the face of chaos and insecurity (Basekic 16-17). However, this neatly-shaped descriptor of domestic regularity ultimately serves as the run-up to a third and final stanza which explodes in a joyous chaos of the couple's own making:

u u / u u  
And remembering ...  
u / u u u / u u / u  
Remembering, || with twinklings and twinges,  
u u / /u u / u u / u / / u  
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that  
u / u / u u / u / u /  
is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, ||  
u / u \ / u u / u  
tobacco crumbs, || vases and fringes. (9-11)

As with "Matthew Cole," memory serves as the catalyst for metamorphosis, only here, Brooks concretizes the couple's past by rooting it in the image of their shared and treasured array of paraphernalia. Behind the dullness, the societal and economic toils that have held this couple fast lies the wondrous jumbled bounty of a life shared. As if to show this, Brooks throws off the rhythmic tightness of the preceding stanza, allowing it to return to the freer form of the accentual. The final line of the poem is extravagant in its

level of description; crammed with images and conjunctions and sprinkled with assonance involving the /i:/ vowel sound (“lean”; “beans”; “beads”; “receipts”), it metaphorically breaks the dam which both the poem’s narrative context and metrical structure have hitherto constituted and shifts the focus from austerity and oppression to the elemental joy of the family, reduced as it may be. Buoying up bell hooks’s theory of homeplace as being a site of resistance rather than just shelter and avoidance, Brooks creates a poetic and thematic space that refuses to adhere to form or subjugation, allowing abundance to reign and deliver (Basekic 16-17).

Not all domestic transformations/metamorphoses in Brooks’s work are overtly rebellious or triumphant, however. The disappointment inherent in romantic and domestic union (or the anticipation thereof) haunts several of her poems. In the first section of *Annie Allen*, the main character emerges from babyhood and early childhood to become dreamy but thoughtful, cerebral, and artistically inclined. She dwells on and repudiates the standards of her parents, Maxie and Andrew, who have “Clogged and soft and sloppy eyes / lost the light that bites or terrifies” (“the parents: people like our marriage” [1-2]). The child who once romped “with gods and fairies” has similarly high aspirations for romantic alliances; in “throwing out the flowers,” she has grown into a young woman who contemplates, with a sharp eye and an elegiac tone laced with tartness, the slow death of adult love and what it leaves behind. The form Brooks uses here comprises (with one exception) a series of *abab* rhymed quatrains in alternating iambic/anapaestic

tetrameter and trimeter. The misery unfurls itself for us with the swaying, repetition-heavy musicality of a sea shanty or drinking song:

u / / / u u / u /  
The duck | fats rot | in the roast | ing pan,  
u u / u u / u u /  
And it's ov | er and ov | er and all,  
u / / / u / u u /  
The fine | fraught smiles, || and spites | that began  
u / u u / u u /  
Before | it was ov | er and all. (1-4)

The opening stanza presents a scenario where the metaphoric marital love-goose (or, in this case, duck) has literally been cooked, leaving behind putrid ruin. Brooks's use of consonance allows the stanza to crunch noisily with /t/ sounds ("fats rot in the roasting pan"; "fraught smiles, and spites"); the use of spondaic substitutions ("fats rot"; "fraught smiles") indicate those incidental factors—both omens and results—that characterize a union gone limp. The second stanza dwells even further on what lies behind after the pageantry of arguably the most famous American family holiday is over:

u / u u / u u / u u /  
The Thanks | giving pray | ing's away | with the silk.  
u / u u / u u /  
It's ov | er and ov | er and all.  
  
u / uu / u u / / u /  
The broc | coli, || yams | and the | bead-but | termilk  
u / u u / u u /  
Are dead | with the hail | in the hall,  
/  
All,

u / u u / u u /  
 Are dead | with the hail | in the hall. (5-10)

The opening line of this extended stanza, with its gentle /k/ sounds and occurrence of internal rhyme (“**praying’s away**”), suggests a less harsh tone than that of the first stanza; however, the resonances that emerge somehow feel more sinister. The dishes listed in Line 7 roll out with a staggered awkwardness, possibly because of the insertion of a medial double iamb (“and the **bead-but-**”); this is followed by the peculiarly phrased line “Are dead with the hail in the hall.” The act of greeting, of engaging in warm interaction, has been negated somehow and, behind that gesture, are living beings. They are slated for removal also. The single-word line “All” precedes a repetition of Line 8; this haunting one-word pause and strange sandwiching of lines immediately shift the emphasis from the death of the material to the death—literal or figurative—of the human. Brooks’s use of consonance here is extremely effective; the proliferation of /l/ sounds occurring in such close proximity provides the collective effect of a sigh or exhalation—in effect, the escaping of vitality and the deflation of hope. In the next stanza—restored to the four-line norm—the reader/listener is faced with the titular cut flowers and their inevitable fate;

u / u u / u u / / /  
 The three | yellow ‘mums | and the one | white ‘mum  
 / u u / / u\  
 Bear to | such brusque bur | ial  
 u / u u / u u / u\  
 With pit | y for lit | tle encom | ium  
 u u / u u / u u /  
 Since it’s ov | er and ov | er and all. (11-14)

The discarded blooms are chrysanthemums; their abbreviated name echoes the English diminutive for “mother,” as well as the colloquial adjective that implies prudent silence (i.e. keeping/staying mum). This choice on Brooks’s part is no accident; the speaker is taking in the feel of rot and disillusionment and speculating on the fate of women condemned to unsatisfying but stoically borne marital unions. The repetition of “mum,” along with the stomp of a spondee at the end of Line 11 (“**white mum**”), adds further emphasis. The dead flowers are thrown out but with the absolute minimum of regret and commemoration. Variations in Line 12 include an initial trochee (“**Bear to**”) and a bacchius (“such **brusque bur-**”); coupled with the succession of plosive /b/ consonants, this imbues the line with a truncated, slightly unwieldy feel. This heaviness gives way to the lighter-sounding Line 13, “With pity for little encomium,” with its flight of /t/ and /t/ sounds leading up to the presentation of the archaic term for words of praise. Indeed, no praise is lavished on the dead flowers in the final stanza; in smoothly rising anapaests and using arresting consonance, Brooks focuses on total decay:

u / u u / u u / u u /  
Forgot | ten and stink | ing they stick | in the can, (15)

However, there is another unexpected shift at this particular moment; we might be contemplating the death of love in all its awfulness, but what if this throwing out of the flowers encapsulates a kind of freedom? Here, the potential for linguistic and semantic

obscurity in Brooks's poetic discourse in *Annie Allen* comes to intriguing fruition. The last three lines of the poem present the reader/listener with a vacated space made fresh again:

u u / / / u u / u /  
And the vase | breath's bet | ter and all, || | and all.  
u / u u / u u / u u /  
And so | for the end | of our life | to a man,  
u / u u / u u /  
Just ov | er, || just ov | er and all. (16-18)

The play of sound (assonance and alliteration) in the first of these lines, along with one marked spondaic substitution (“**breath's bet-**”) and the repetition of “and all,” implies that there might be a silver lining to the situation. The speaker mentions “the end of our life to a man,” and immediately we are forced to consider whether we are looking at the end of personal agency at the hands of a man or, on a more positive note, the end of captivity. The metre may give us a clue; restored to swinging anapaestic regularity, it emphasizes continuity, whether that be for better or for worse. “[T]hrowing out the flowers” may certainly be about a death, but nothing is really done with. In the use of its chosen refrain, the poem drives home that, in spite of decay and disappointments, life operates in cycles; the worst—and maybe its best—will come around, over and over, again and again.

In “Brelve: A Battered Woman,”<sup>160</sup> we see an example of another poem taking on the romantic and domestic disappointments of women; being one of Brooks’s later works, it differs from its pre-1967 predecessors in that it operates using the objective of topical and thematic directness and greater linguistic clarity. Brooks had, by this point, vocally rescinded her attachment to European forms; however, upon close reading, we can see and hear that this particular poem is far from formless. The upward movement of the iamb and the anapaest continue to govern its movement; treating it as an accentual-syllabic work and inserting scansion enables us to better follow and feel through the plight and promised deliverance of the titular character.

The poem’s compact first four lines lay out the marriage’s auspicious beginnings:

u u / u / (u)  
She began | the marriage  
u u / u / (u)  
with exhil | aration.  
u / u / /  
She chose, || | with live care,  
/ / u / / (u)  
sauce pans, || | a blue roaster, (1-4)

In Lines 1 and 2, we hear a complete sonic match in the scansion: one anapaest followed by an iamb and an extra-syllable ending. The second pair of lines is again extremely similar, differing only due to a spondaic substitution (“**sauce pans**”) and an extra-syllable

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<sup>160</sup> *GGT*.

ending (“a **blue roaster**.” The mood is one of optimism, of a belief in harmony. The poem continues with two lines that match *visually* but not sonically:

u / u / u / u / u /  
a set | of sil | ver plate | from Marsh | all Field,  
u / / u u / u u / (u u)  
a lace tab | le cloth (head | ed for Heritage!) (5-6)

Line 5 is in perfect unvaried iambic pentameter; Line 6 consists of a bacchius, two anapaests and a double-extra-syllable ending. We see Brelve as aspirational as well as romantic, acquiring the material goods needed to accessorize a home and, eventually, serve as a gift to future generations. The following two lines, conveying the intimacy of the actual union, again return the reader/listener to an impression of perfect regularity:

u u / u u / (u)  
He had smiled. || He had felt her.  
u u / u u / (u)  
He was bright | for the wedding. (7-8)

Again we see and hear lines that have the exact same scansion pattern—in this case, two anapaests followed by a final extra-syllable ending. Repetition and anaphora add to the impression of parts working together, of the “form” of the marriage idyll being adhered to. However, as the title of the poem indicates, this perfect union is not to be. The promise of tranquility and regularity gives way to chaos:

/ u u / u / / u / (u)  
Bright for | the week, || the two weeks. || The four. She



/        /    u /    u /    /  
 Could not | believe | The First Blow.  
   u    /    /    u /  
 She could not | believe  
   u u / u \    u /    / (u)  
 The arri | val of | her own loathing:  
 /    u    u u /    u /  
 Nause | a behind | her eyes:  
   u    /    u u /    u u    / (u)  
 The fear | of a mem | orized footstep:  
 (u)/ u /    u /  
 Ice | in vein | and brain. (9-15)

Regularity is removed from line length, although the rising thrust of the metre continues to direct the poem. What is happening to Brelve—the violence at the hands of the husband, the creep of hatred and outrage and terror—is unpredictable, but its momentum is unstoppable. Amongst the variations here, we note the prevalence of the bacchius (“the **two weeks**”; “The **First Blow**”; “She **could not**”; “her **own loath-**”), which operates as a rising foot like the iamb but which delivers the pounding emphasis of a spondee. The poem’s narrative trajectory moves on to further describe the death of the home-dream which has accompanied Brelves’s exposure to violence and betrayal:

  u    u /    u /  
 The descent | of dream.  
 u    /    /    /    /    u u/(u)  
 The dried-out | drum-beat | of desire.  
 u    /    u /    u /    u \  
 The slams | of doors | down cor | ridors.  
   u /    u u /    u    u /    u / (u)  
 Decay | of construc | tion, || of cold | construction,  
   /    u    u \    u /  
 Scrupu | lous and | confirmed.

\ u / \ u /  
End of love. || End of love. (16-21)

This section of the poem, embodying the main character’s reckoning with abuse-generated trauma, takes on a new florid richness; in addition to parallel structures (“The...”), Brooks front-loads these six lines with alliteration involving /d/, /c/, and medial /r/ sounds, internal rhyme (“The slams of **doors** down **corridors**”), and repetition. The effect is immediate and theatrical. Eventually, the sonic and imagistic maelstrom calms as Brelve gathers her resources to push past the horror in whatever way she can:

u / u u / (u u)  
But pres | ently, || presently,  
u / / / u u / u u / (u)  
The self-| wrought ho | ur of self |-confrontation  
u / / (u u)  
And small steps to a  
/ / u / (u)  
Raw res | urrection. (22-25)

Again, the lines are mismatched in length, although Brooks’s use of repetition (“presently”; “self”) suggests the tentative but decisive actions her subject is able to take, drawing on her store of strength, honesty, patience, and tenacity. The half-rhyme that joins “confrontation” and “resurrection” has portent also; a “match” for Brelve has been found, but it is that stronger spirit which lies within. The final two lines round out the poem with grace and careful optimism:

/        /        u /    u/   u/   u /  
New Shapes | of hosp | ital | ity | to Self.  
/    /    u/    u /    u/    u    / (u)  
New arch | itect | ure in | anoth | er morning. (26-27)

Again, as with earlier pairs, there is a metrical/sonic kinship joining these lines, which are given the further impression of affinity through anaphora. It is curious to note that the metre here is the iambic pentameter which so displeased Lee. However, rather than emulate Western models, this particular choice does its own special work of allowing another metamorphosis to take place—lending authority and universality to discourse concerning the reclaimed identity of a strong Black woman who has come through the fires of abuse to reclaim her true self.

Brooks's later work, like her earlier work, made it possible for the miraculous and the transformative to occur within the poem-space, thus emphasizing resilience and essential strength which emerged in, and because of, domestic environments and constraints. For the poet, one of the greatest embodiments of essential strength was the figure of the mother. How this role morphed during her career as a writer and activist—how it moved from the realm of the private to the public—is of particular interest.

“Believe me, I loved you all”: The Mothering Body, The Mothering Form

We can hazard a guess that most who make a study of Brooks's life and work can testify to the presence of protective, caring forces. Motherhood—whether biological or encapsulated in cross-generational friendships, mentoring, educational, or philanthropic

initiatives—defined much of the poet’s long and distinguished career (Watkins). She herself was lucky enough to have enjoyed a long and close relationship with her own coolly exacting but devoted mother; from Keziah, she inherited a mindset that combined discipline and principle with an (admittedly less dogmatic) faith in higher powers and a belief in the inherent goodness of humanity. As part of her own earlier shaping of homeplace, Brooks cultivated a mothering practice and ethos that seemed to take primacy over everything else. In a story in the *Chicago Daily News* (from September 28, 1963), she laid out her priorities thus:

Maybe I would have done better as a poet if I didn’t think that nothing I do is more important than being a mother, taking care of my husband, and getting a meal together. Living is the most important thing to do, and poetry comes after that. That’s how I feel. (qtd. in Kent 165)

At times, the intricacies of balancing “living”—mothering—and poetry weighed heavily upon Brooks’s shoulders. In 1951, saddled with eleven-year-old Hank and three-month-old Nora, she unleashed her exasperation in a letter to Langston Hughes, lamenting how

she lacked the time “to call [her] soul [her] own.”<sup>161</sup> Angela Jackson accords reverence to Brooks for this balancing act, speaking of how her mentor and biographical subject embodied a benchmark for women whose lives combined the writer’s craft with the obligations of motherhood (69).

In her essay “Homeplace,” bell hooks describes how Black women were historically pressed into domestic service for whites while being expected, on their own home fronts, to construct and tend spaces that would act as bulwarks against discrimination, oppression, and violence (42). Brooks herself had worked briefly in domestic service and had experienced firsthand its grinding humiliations, which, in the words of Kent, “stripped her of a sense of dignity” (42). The degradation and outrage that Brooks must have felt waft through “Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat”;<sup>162</sup> the poem tells the story of Mrs. Miles, a white matron who, having hired the eponymous Black woman as a maid, is shocked by a surprise moment of tenderness between the new hire and the

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<sup>161</sup> Certainly the question of the removal of time has accompanied representations of the housewife in both literature and in expository texts; the Introduction of this dissertation cites (amongst other examples) Dunbar-Nelson’s “I Sit and Sew” and Gilman’s “The Housewife” as examples where the vertiginous forces of unending domestic labour separate women from more useful practices (involvement in the War Effort in Dunbar-Nelson and self-actualization in Gilman). In Chapter 10 of *The Feminine Mystique*, “Housewifery Expands to Fill the Time Available”, Friedan describes how the media and the promotion of domestic technology, coupled with the hegemony of the prevalent sexist discourse, created a phenomenon whereby (primarily white) suburban middle-class women were corralled into lives of exhaustion in which domestic routines, fed by imposed standards and psychological dissatisfaction, ballooned to consume entire days (Friedan 152-166).

<sup>162</sup> *BE*.

white woman's child. Even before the incident, the reader/listener is presented with Mrs. Miles's lopsided assigning of priorities; her white maid/housekeeper, called into action when her own family experiences a shocking act of violence, is treated as having forsaken the family of her employer. In a fleet of free verse lines made jagged through mismatched lengths and a liberal sprinkling of caesurae, Brooks savages the white employer's emotional tone-deafness and sense of entitlement:

But the Irishwoman had left!  
A message had come.  
Something about a murder at home.  
A daughter's husband — || "berserk," that was the phrase:  
The dear man had "gone berserk"  
And short work — || with a hammer — || had been made  
Of this daughter and her nights and days.  
The Irishwoman (underpaid,  
Mrs. Miles remembered with smiles),  
Who was a perfect jewel, || a red-faced trump,  
A good old sort, || a baker  
Of rum cake, || a maker  
of Mustard, || would never return.  
Mrs. Miles had begged the bewitched woman  
To finish, || at least, || the biscuit blending,  
To tarry till the curry was done,  
To show some concern  
For the burning soup, || to attend to the tending  
Of the tossed salad. || "Inhuman,"  
Patsy Houlihan had called Mrs. Miles.  
"Inhuman." || And "a fool."  
And "a cool  
One." (19-42)

Brooks's levelling of her satiric barbs is deft and effective. The language she chooses ("perfect jewel"; "concern"; "tending") implies a perceived abandonment of care and

betrayal of the very worst kind; the erratic weaving-in of end rhymes transmits a comic disconnect between the employer’s estimation of crisis and Mrs. Houlihan’s actual (and grossly unrecognized) catastrophe on her own home turf. The employer, blunted by cruelty and privilege, wired for exploitation (she is satisfied that Mrs. Houlihan remained “underpaid”), is estranged from charity—indeed, from the ability to love. Brooks’s refusal to admit total sonic harmony (i.e. symmetrical length, consistent metre) into her lines while linking them with rhyme allows the irony to hit the reader/listener in a sly but effective manner. The white Mrs. Houlihan has, we admit, been treated shabbily but is still viewed as “a perfect jewel”, a necessary instrument in the running of the home. The new maid, on the other hand, is othered to the point of being deemed a member of another species: “A lion, really. Poised / To pounce. A puma. A panther. A black / Bear” (3-5). When an affectionate moment occurs between Mrs. Miles’s small son and the new maid, the employer perceives all hell to have broken loose:

u / u / / u u / / / u u /  
 Her cream | y child kissed | by the | Black maid! || square on | the mouth!  
 / / / / / / u / u /  
 World yelled, || world writhed, || world turned | to light | and rolled  
 / u u / u / u / u /  
 Into | her kitch | en, || near | ly knocked | her down. (47-49)

The employer's shock is transmitted, in these lines, through Brooks’s use of a bacchius, a double iamb, three pounding consecutive spondees, and an initial trochee. But perhaps even more dramatic for the reader/listener is the way in which, despite Mrs. Miles’s

protestations, there is an aura of resistant harmony made manifest by the equalizing of the lines' lengths and their approaching the authoritative march of iambic pentameter. Mrs. Miles, in blind panic and disgust, moves toward the pair; for her, the touch of a Black woman represents “purity despoiled / Committed to sourness, disordered, soiled” (65-66). She endeavours to pull the child from the embrace

(u) / u / / / u u / u u / (u u)  
 Coo | ing, || “Come.” || | (Come out | of the can | nibal wilderness,  
 / / / u u / u / u /  
 Dirt, || dark, || | into | the sun | and bloom | ful air.  
 u / u / u / u / / /  
 Return | to fresh | ness of | your right | world, || wear  
 / u u / u / u / u /  
 Sweetness | again. || | Be done | with beast, || | duress.) (68-71)

In the first line of this excerpt (structured as an *abba*-rhymed envelope), we sense the physical and emotional tug-of-war inherent in the situation through Brooks's expansion of the visual line length, the alliteration which loads the line with hard /k/ sounds, and the addition of a double-extra-syllable ending (“-nibal **wilderness**”). Throughout these four lines, there is strong rhetorical emphasis implied by the use of spondaic and trochaic substitutions (“**Come out**”; “**Dirt dark**”; “**world, wear**”; “**into**”; “**sweetness**”), although the pull of the iambic metre implies a lulling force that the mother cannot break through. Eventually, the little boy himself asserts his will:

/ u u / u u / / u u / u / u /  
 Child with | contin | uing | cling is | sued his No | in fin | al fire,



/            /    u /        u /  
 Kissed back | the col | oured maid,  
  
 /        /    u /    u /    u /    u /  
 Not wise | enough | to freeze | or be | afraid.  
 /        u    u /    u        /    u /    u        /  
 Conscious | of kind | ness, || eas | y crea | ture bond.  
 /        u    u /    u    u /    u \    u /  
 Love had | been han | dy and ra | pid to | respond. (72-76)

Again, a longer line (this time, highly varied iambic septameter) establishes a struggle; the line after it is only three feet, but its brevity delivers a dramatic sucker punch as it presents the child, “conscious of kindness” and unspoiled by the learned attitudes of racism, reciprocating the maid’s affection. The following two lines relax and expand into iambic pentameter. Furthermore, these four lines read as rhyming couplets, implying a hermetic closeness.

The poem’s last four lines present Mrs. Miles, her physical body inflamed by anger and disbelief, cast out into a “wilderness” of her own making:

/    u    u /    u        /    u /    u /  
 Heat at | the hair | line, || heat | between | the bowels,  
 u /    u u /    u        /    u /    u u /  
 exam | ining seem | ing coarse | unnat | ural scene,  
 u /    \ /    u /    u /    u /  
 she saw | all things | except | herself | serene:  
 /    /    /    /    u /    u /    u /  
 child, || big | black wom | an, || pret | ty kitch | en towels. (77-80)

As with the preceding example, we see spondaic and trochaic substitutions laying heavy emphasis on what has been deemed “unnatural,” as well as anapaestic variations in Line

78 that make real the heart-quickenning effect of the shock. And yet, as in Lines 68 to 71, Brooks arranges this quatrain into an envelope rhyming pattern (*abba*). The effect is powerful; Mrs. Miles, the lady of the house, is shut out of the “envelope” of the loving bond taking root (however briefly) in her own perfectly-cultivated domestic space. The maid in Brooks’s poem remains, like so many other Black domestic workers, a cog in the machine that harnessed the physical and emotional labour of women of colour while removing them from their own homes—the spheres of influence which acted as sites of resistance. However, through the use of form, the poet here manages to transpose that potential for power and resistance, albeit fleetingly, onto the domestic terrain of the oppressor.

In the twin poems of “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” and “Final Quatrain for Emmett Till,”<sup>163</sup> Brooks presents another comparative examination of the performance of motherhood from both a white and a Black perspective, albeit to more pointed and devastating effect. The subject of the first poem is Carolyn Bryant, the white Southern woman who was implicated in the 1955 torture and murder of Emmett Till, a young Black boy whom she falsely accused of

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<sup>163</sup> *BE*.

improper advances.<sup>164</sup> The Mississippi housewife of the poem is shown as being—like Annie Allen—bewitched by romantic idealism, albeit from the other side of the colour line. Her reference point is the ballad, yet Brooks presents Bryant's aspirations as highly flawed; her subject's meandering thoughts unfurl in jaggedly enjambed free verse:

From the first it had been like a  
Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.  
A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches,  
Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite  
Understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school.

Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild"  
Of the ballad. Pursued  
By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.  
The Happiness-Ever-After.  
That was worth anything.  
It was good to be a "maid mild."  
That made the breath go fast. (1-12)

The subject of the poem speaks of a "beat inevitable," and yet there is no dominant consistent rhythm/metrical template to speak of; what poetic devices do occur, namely the use of alliteration (the plosive /b/ sound in the first five lines) and repetition (of "ballad"

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<sup>164</sup> On August 28, 1955, 14-year-old Chicagoan Emmett Till was in Mississippi visiting relatives when he was accused by a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, of whistling at her and making inappropriate comments in a corner store. Later that night, Bryant's husband, Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milan retrieved Till from the house where he was staying, beat and mutilated him, and threw the boy's corpse into the Tallahatchie River. Bryant and Milan were acquitted of the murder, and Carolyn Bryant would herself deny, many years later, that Till had committed any wrongdoing. Till's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted on an open casket funeral for her son back in Chicago. Pictures of the teenager's disfigured body were published in the mainstream Black media, generating widespread outrage (A. Jackson 78-79).

and “maid”), convey an awkwardness in terms of approaching and appropriating art. Mrs. Bryant tries desperately to construct her own “ballad,” the scaffold of a myth based on different elements: herself as White Unspoiled Southern Woman, her husband as “Fine Prince,” and the child Till as the “Dark Villain.” None of this, of course, makes sense; albeit aroused by the idea of being fought over and “defended,” she finds herself eventually coming to terms with the idea that she is incapable of constructing the desired narrative and finding a deserving place therein:

Confronting her more and more as this first day after the trial  
And acquittal wore on) rushing  
With his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)  
That little foe.  
So much had happened, she could not remember now what that foe had done  
Against her, or if anything had been done.  
The one thing in this world that she did know and knew  
With terrifying clarity was that her composition  
Had disintegrated. That, although the pattern prevailed,  
The breaks were everywhere. That she could think  
Of no thread capable of the necessary  
Sew-work.... (42-53)

Brooks’s use of wildly varying line lengths shows the subject’s mind in chaos, reaching out for details that might consolidate her presentation of Till as a “foe.” Fed on a diet of Southern gender roles, romantic ideations, and mangled mandated schoolroom literary studies, Mrs. Bryant lacks the means to properly assemble a viable story that might justify her husband’s crimes and her own misguidedness in bringing them about (McKibbin 672). The “pattern” that “prevail[s]” is an imposed one, without compassion or logic.

Mrs. Bryant's coming to (semi-)awareness begins with her assessment of these disparate details that will not fit together; here, Brooks brings in the metaphor of "sew-work" that cannot be completed, another domestic task (after the burning of the family bacon) at which the subject fails. The choice of the term "composition" has a triple meaning here: it refers to the trajectory of the story presented in court, the construction of the persisting myth on which it is based, and the assumed emotional attitudes she has been presenting in the home. As she watches her husband's behaviour as a father (striking their child for throwing something at the family table) and finds herself, at the poem's end, subject to his rough, amorous advances, her "hatred for him burst[s] into glorious flower" (137). We are allowed to sense, in this poem, that Mrs. Bryant has come to realize the evil of the white Southern misogynist/racist project; having said this, Brooks keeps her at arm's length from the reader/listener. Mrs. Bryant's worst "domestic" failing of all is her inability to reach outwards as a protective figure, a mother beyond her homespace and race, to preserve the safety of a child. The way Brooks deals with her, therefore, makes her understandable but not entirely forgivable (McKibbin 669).

This particular void facing Mrs. Bryant is contrasted with the arguably more unbearable one facing the mother of the murdered boy in "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till." Unlike the rambling free-verse work which preceded it, the poem, although not a quatrain proper, is limited to eight tight lines of accentual metre:

/ u / u uu /u / /  
Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;

u / u / / u  
the tint of pulled taffy.  
u / u u / /  
She sits in a red room,  
/ u / / u  
drinking black coffee.  
u / u u / /  
She kisses her killed boy.  
u / u /u  
And she is sorry  
/ u u / u /  
Chaos in windy grays  
/ u / / u  
through a red prairie.

This little poem, elegiac in nature, shows Emmett’s grieving mother, Mamie Till Bradley, in a spare room that is described as “red,” bringing to mind rage and the aftermath of carnage. Although physically presented with an image that implies sweetness (“the tint of pulled taffy”), Mamie drinks “black coffee,” an elixir of bitterness that also awakens. Her grief and guilt are made tangible to the reader/listener; the decision to send Emmett away for a holiday, into the arms of relatives, has resulted in the death of a beloved child and the unleashing of a tidal wave (“Chaos in windy grays”) of horror in the world at large (Jackson 86). And yet, this relatively small poem-space, sonically accentuated with gentle alliteration (/k/, /r/, /t/, and /s/), assonance (/i/ and /ei/), and the reassuring insertion of slant end rhymes, even as it alludes to “chaos” and the “red prairie” of unending violence that stretches forth beyond the room and into the future, offers Emmett’s mother a space in which to grieve. The “room” of Brooks’s poem may be small, but it is far away in character from, for example, the “pinchy” birthplace of Annie Allen. Instead, it becomes a

locus where Mamie can be held and protected, a womb or heart-like space that “mothers the mother” and lends dignity to the performance of grief.

The strong empathy that Brooks felt for ordinary Black folk corralled into domestic service extended itself to women untethered from family circles who found themselves “in trouble,” as well as those who, hemmed in by the cruel limitations of substandard urban housing—the “narrow room[s]” and kitchenettes—were forced to make excruciating choices regarding what size of family they could realistically support. In an America that had not yet seen termination fully legalized by the establishment of *Roe v. Wade*,<sup>165</sup> abortion for people of colour carried with it the onus of not only stigma but also peril, being performed in less than hygienic conditions by either unqualified individuals or by the pregnant woman herself (Evans 229). In “the mother,”<sup>166</sup> Brooks harnesses the form of the dramatic monologue to describe, in thirty-two mixed iambic-anapaestic lines of varying length, the interior reality of a woman who has had several procedures, has seen first-hand her aborted fetuses and who, with an agonized wistfulness, mulls over what can now never happen. The first ten lines, using the pronoun “you,” are immediate in their impact:

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<sup>165</sup> In 1970, a woman known in court records as “Jane Roe” filed a lawsuit against Henry Wade, the district attorney of Dallas County, Texas, challenging a Texas law which made all abortions illegal, save for in cases when the life of the mother was in peril. Roe claimed that the existing laws were unconstitutional, in that they were superfluously vague and violated her personal privacy. The case was decided in the Supreme Court in favour of Roe on January 22, 1973 (“*Roe v. Wade*”).

<sup>166</sup> *SB*.

u / u \ u / u u /  
 Abor | tions will | not let | you forget.  
 u u / u u / u u / u u / u /  
 You remem | ber the chil | dren you got | that you did | not get,  
 u / / / u u / u u / / /  
 The damp | small pulps | with a lit | tle or with | no hair,  
 u / u u / u u / u / u u /  
 The sing | ers and work | ers that nev | er hand | led the air.  
 u u / u u / u /  
 You will nev | er neglect | or beat  
 u u / u u / u u /  
 Them, || or sil | ence or buy | with a sweet.  
 u u / u / / u / u /  
 You will ne | ver wind up | the suck | ing-thumb  
 u / u u / u /  
 Or scut | tle off ghosts | that come.  
 u u / u / u u / u u / u /  
 You will nev | er leave | them, || control | ling your lus | cious sigh,  
 u / u u / u \ u / u u / u /  
 Return | for a snack | of them, || with gob | bling moth | er-eye. (1-10)

Forgoing all recourse to euphemism, the first line sets out, in no uncertain terms, what the poem is about. We see (and hear) first hand, via spondaic substitutions, what has emerged in the place of the living, “damp **small pulps** with a little or with **no hair**” that are hereby exempt from the activities and experiences of life, be they good (sweets, assuaging bedtime fears) or bad (being ignored or beaten). The use of the end rhymes in the couplets establishes the illusion of kinship and logic, and yet there are elements of ambiguity and estrangement inserted into the proceedings. The verb “get” carries multiple meanings: these “children” are both conceived and received, summoned through love and yet gifted



by accident. “Get” also implies an act of understanding or aiming to understand.<sup>167</sup> The speaker’s uncertainty also comes through in the mixing of line lengths, the hybridizing of light rhyme and repetition in the first couplet (“forget”; “get”), and the introduction of awkward enjambment (“beat / Them”). Lines 9 and 10 present the speaker conjuring the heady tenderness of motherhood; the expansion of Line 10 to an alexandrine shows the speaker as in love with the lost child, insatiable in her need to gaze upon them. The next part of the poem amps up the ragged un-matching of line length as it returns the reader/listener to the awareness of the female body:

u u / u u / u \ u / u / u \ u / /  
 I have heard | in the voic | es of | the wind | the voic | es of | my dim | killed  
 / (u)  
 children.  
 u u u / u u u /  
 I have contract | ed. || I have eased  
 u / / u u / u u / u /  
 My dim dears | at the breasts | they could nev | er suck.  
 u u / / u u / u u /  
 I have said, || | Sweets, || if | I sinned, || | if I seized  
 u /  
 Your luck  
 u u / u u / u u /  
 And your lives | from your un | finished reach, (11-16)

Haunting the speaker (and conveyed as a repetition-heavy echo in the octometer line) are the voices of the lost; Brooks’s use of assonance involving the /i/ sound (“wind”; “dim

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<sup>167</sup> I acknowledge that this multiplicity of meanings associated with the word “get” was pointed out to me by Dr. Jeffrey Donaldson.

killed children”) comes across as delicate but persistent, an effect given more heft by the insertion of a final spondee (“**killed child**”) and the startling choice of the word “killed.” Similarly, the use of the word “contracted” in the following line is curious in its polyvalence, implying both the act of physically pushing a child out into the world and that of making a contract—establishing an understanding (Evans 231). But understanding proves elusive in Brooks’s poem; as the work moves on and the line lengths tussle with each other and occurrences of rhyme come and go, so the speaker struggles with herself to rationalize her actions, insisting that “in [her] deliberateness [she] was not deliberate” (21) and that the almost-infant “was never made” (25). The final three lines of the poem, addressed with plaintive anguish to the ghost-children who “never giggled or planned or cried” (30), form a collective entreaty to be understood, to allow love and kinship to prevail in the most trying of circumstances:

u / u u / u /  
Believe | me, || I loved | you all.  
u / u u / u u / u u u / u / (u)  
Believe | me, || I knew | you, || though faint | ly, || and I loved, || | I loved you  
/  
All. (31-33)

The penultimate two lines, driven by the upward-moving iambs and anapaests, rock as gently and as insistently as a lullaby, even through the differing line lengths. This brings us to the final line, which has been distilled down to a single word—“All.” Granted the same portent as the monosyllabic “All” seen and heard in “throwing out the flowers,” the

word emerges as if born from the “contracted” body of the poem itself. If one is to extend one’s imagination to its limits, this single word—tiny but resonant—might be viewed as the very embodiment of the kind of “phantom baby” that haunts the speaker. It harbours fragility and yet encompasses the humanity of all Black children, living or dead, “made” or “never made,” whose lives have been truncated or undermined by systemic racism, poverty, inadequate housing, gender oppression, and violence both intra-racial and interracial. It is deliberate that “the mother” is not called “the almost-mother” or “the abortion”; its use of the monologue format and, within that, modulations in diction, metre, line length, and rhyme show a struggle between possibility and futility, the present and the future. What we sense is sadness but also a reaching towards love that foretells Brooks’s own expansion in her definitions of motherhood and protection.

The mass of difficulties facing Black mothers in mid-20th-century American urban environments continues as a theme in Brooks’s second collection, *Annie Allen* (1949); as we have already noticed, the poet uses, in this book, a more ornate (and challenging) lexicon to tell the story of its protagonist, whose addiction to romantic narratives, coupled with the challenges of racial inequality and socioeconomic privations, leads her through a gamut of personal disappointments (Stanford 284-286). In the section of the book named “The Womanhood,” we see a now-grown Annie alone with her children; their father has gone off to fight in Europe. In a cycle of sonnets (“the children of the poor”), she agonizes over her impotence in the face of the penury and prejudice that face her offspring. Here is the second in the cycle:

/     u   u /   u /     u     /   u /  
 What shall | I give | my child | ren? || who | are poor,  
 u   /   u /   u /   \   /   u /  
 Who are | adjudged | the least | wise of | the land,  
 u /   u /   u /   u /   u /  
 Who are | my sweet | est lep | ers, || who | demand  
 u /   u /   u /   u \   u /  
 No vel | vet and | no vel | vety | velour;  
 u /   u     /   u \   u /   / \  
 But who | have begged | me for | a brisk | contour,  
 /   u   u /   u /   u /   u \  
 Crying | that they | are quas | i, || cont | raband  
 u /   u /   u /   u \   u /  
 Because | unfin | ished, || gra | ven by | a hand  
 /   u   u /   u /   u u \   u /  
 Less than | angel | ic, || ad | mirable | or sure. (1-8)

The speaker conveys her sorrow and frustration that her children are doomed to face lives of prejudice and exclusion. She stresses their innocence and modesty, how they long not for luxuries but for “a brisk contour”—that is, to be defined as significant, worthy of notice. As with the titular speaker in “hunchback girl: she thinks of heaven,” the children are presented as being cursed with the impression that they are physically and/or spiritually unable (“quasi, contraband / ... unfinished, graven by a hand less than angelic”) to fit into the world they find themselves in. And yet, the discourse that lays out this dilemma, this blueprint for suffering, tries on all manner of lyrical tricks; there is a sense of urgency transmitted by the use of anaphora and repetition (“who”) that keeps the focus on the children, as well as the initial trochaic substitutions in Lines 1, 6 and 8 (“**What** shall”; “**Crying**”; “**Less** than”) that seize the reader/listener’s attention. There are

flurries of alliteration (/l/, /v/, /b/, /k/) and assonance (/e/, /aɪ/) that, at times, seem to crowd the lines with a lush music. There are end rhymes also; “land”/“demand”/“hand” and “poor”/“velour”/“contour” work with each other sonically, and yet their tone is slightly “off,” with the use of light rhyme and the matching of rising and falling rhymes (“**velour**”/“**contour**”). Annie has brought her children into the world, but what kind of life can she make for them? What is the extent of her power as a maker? The poem continues:

u / u / u / u / u /  
My hand | is stuffed | with mode, || | design, || | device.  
u / / / u \ u / u /  
But I | lack ac | cess to | my prop | er stone.  
u / u / u / u / u /  
And plen | itude | of plan | shall not | suffice  
u / u / u / u / u /  
Nor grief | nor love | shall be | enough | alone  
u / u \ u / u / u /  
To rat | ify | my lit | tle halves | who bear  
u / u / u / u / u /  
Across | an aut | umn freez | ing ev | erywhere. (9-14)

Brooks presents Annie as a kind of artist, an unrelenting fantasist whose dreams of dining on “melted opals for [her] milk” and “pearl-leaf for [her] cracker”<sup>168</sup> and being swept away to wedded bliss by a “paladin”<sup>169</sup> are under siege from the realities of poverty and racism that now threaten to deliver her children to disaster (Stanford 288). And yet, as someone whose “hand is stuffed with mode, design, device,” she is permitted the

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<sup>168</sup> “the ballad of late Annie” (15-16).

<sup>169</sup> “The Anniad” (18).

eloquence of a visionary desperate to keep her family dreams afloat; the last six lines of the sonnet, like the eight that precede them, feature copious examples of alliteration (/d;/ /p/) and assonance (/ æ/; /ʌ/). For all this potential, Annie is denied, in real life, the raw materials with which to build the dream-life that will keep her “little halves”—extensions of her very self—alive and safe. In processing this sonnet, we sense, as readers/listeners, how Brooks goes beyond the realm of experimentation in her fashioning of these forms with their cryptic turns of phrase and instead creates an exquisite tension between the artist’s potential for dreaming and making and that of the ordinary individual hemmed in by circumstance. Annie’s predicament, therefore, becomes Brooks’s predicament; as a maker (and as a mother), what changes can she truly effect?

An interesting shift in style and tone can be divined in “Life for my child is simple, and is good,” also taken from the “Womanhood” section of *Annie Allen*. Although the voice of this 18-line poem is supposed to be that of Annie, the inspiration was Brooks’s own son Henry “Hank” Blakely III and his rambunctious toddler escapades (Kent 90-91). Written in lines of varied length and driven primarily by iambic metre, the poem adopts an “easier” vocabulary and feel as it attempts to establish commonality between the beleaguered mother and her active and curious charge:

/ u u / u / u / u /  
 Life for | my child | is sim | ple, || and | is good.  
 u / u / (u) / u / u u /  
 He knows | his wish. || | Yes, | but that | is not all.  
 u / u / \ /  
 Because | I know | mine too.

u u / \ / u // u / u/ u /  
 And we both | want joy | of undee | and un | abid | ing things,  
 u / u / uu / u / u / \ uu / (u)  
 Like kick | ing ov | er a chair | or throw | ing blocks out | of a window  
 u / u / uu / / /  
 Or tip | ping ov | er an ice | box pan  
 u / u u / u u / u \ u u / uu / (u)  
 Or snatch | ing down cur | tains or fing | ering | an elect | rical outlet  
 uu / u \ u / uu u/ u /  
 Or a jour | ney or | a friend | or an ille | gal kiss. (1-8)

The first two lines of the poem proceed in iambic pentameter, with a ghost half-iamb after the first caesura in the second line; this lends drama to the speaker’s turning to consider the implications of the child’s behaviour. The “undee and unabiding things” that bring the mother and child together are presented in the tumbling, hexametrical Lines 4, 5, and 7, as well as Line 6, which has four feet. The effect is undoubtedly comical, what with the plethora of *or*’s that emphasize the unendingness of toddler chaos. However, Line 8 shifts in mood; there is an elegiac air to how the grown mother longs for adventure, adult companionship, and illicit romantic intrigue. The line is in iambic pentameter but is quickened by an initial anapaest and, even more so, by the fourth paeon (“or an ille-”) in the fourth foot, which carries a frisson of secrecy. The poem goes on to examine the deeper implications (and saving power) of the child’s wildness:

/ u u / u \ u /  
 No. || There | is more | to it | than that.  
 u \ u / u / u / u /  
 It is | that he | has nev | er been | afraid.  
 / u u / u / u / u / / uu / uu /  
 Rather, || he reach | es out | and lo | the chair falls | with a beaut | iful crash,

u u / / / u u / u /  
 And the blocks | fall, || down | on the peop | le's heads,  
 u u / u u / u / uu / u / u /  
 And the wat | er comes sloosh | ing slop | pily out | across | the floor.  
 u / /  
 And so forth.  
 / u u / u / u / u/(u u)  
 Not that | success, || | for him, || | is sure, || infallible.  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 But nev | er has | he been | afraid | to reach.  
 u / u u / (u)  
 His les | ions are legion.  
 u / u / u /  
 But reach | ing is | his rule. (9-18)

The *Keystone Cops* antics continue: the overturning of chairs, the braining of unsuspecting heads with blocks, and what is presumably the overfilling of a bathtub; a single bacchius (“and **so forth**”) gives a wry and weary nod to the reader/listener who, by now, has gotten the general idea. The mood then shifts again into the territory of the wistful, echoing the themes of the “children of the poor” sonnet. Line 15 reminds us, with its brisk initial trochee (“**Not** that”), halting multiple caesurae, and slightly unwieldy double-extra-syllable ending (“**infallible**”), that things will presumably remain difficult for this spirited Black boy. However, we are reassured of what arms him in the next line; this reads as proud, assured, and perfectly metrically regular. The speaker tells us, in Line 17, that the boy bears his scars from his exploits and, in the final line, that “reaching is his rule”—he will extend himself in curiosity and daring, regardless of the consequences. It is a quality which, to the speaker, hovers as both a promise and threat. The fact that the two final lines—each rich with alliteration and assonance—are, in fact, two separate halves of



a full iambic line poses some interesting questions to those readers/listeners who care to peer deeply into Brooks's use of form. Is she referring to the "baby steps" required for the child to attain full independence and agency in the face of inequality? Or is she foreseeing some kind of discord and division?

Brooks's view of herself as a mother/mentor would shift throughout her life; of no little importance in this readjustment would be the young people who came into her circle. Hank had, at eighteen, an acrimonious confrontation with his parents that would result in his leaving home, initiating an estrangement that would only begin to thaw near the end of Brooks's life (Kent 148-149; Jackson 181-182). Brooks would find a subsequent sense of deep kinship with Don L. Lee, a young poet who had attended the first workshop that Brooks conducted with the Blackstone Rangers street gang in 1968. Lee's own childhood had been entirely unlike Hank's sheltered upbringing; he had been born in Detroit to a mother who, driven into poverty and alcoholism, had turned to prostitution in order to survive. She would eventually die from a brain hemorrhage, having been rejected by a whites-only hospital. Throughout his childhood and young adulthood, Lee had experienced the ravages of systemic racism, intraracial prejudice, and intersectional oppression at every turn: they had killed his mother, limited the scope of his educational opportunities, excluded him from church activities, and exposed him to aggression and isolation in both the army and in his job as a stevedore. His trials had forged in him a simmering rage but also a deep resourcefulness and commitment to Black advocacy. In Brooks, Lee found a mother figure, a teacher, a co-performer, a sparring

partner, and a champion. Lee, on the other hand, provided Brooks with a guide to a world of harsh realities, where Black unity and militancy were necessary, leading the older poet to describe him as “a star for black people, young and old, uncompromising, serious, consistent—warmth inside a mail of necessary cold” (qtd. in Kent 206). Lee and Brooks disagreed on a number of topics, including the use of European perspectives and poetic models, the inclusion of curse words in poetry, and the need for a purely Black stance that excluded white involvement. In spite of this, Lee became Brooks’s “cultural son,” assuming a role based on love, shared values, and involvement in the community at large that needed them (Jackson 98-100; Kent 204-208). In “Young Heroes II,”<sup>170</sup> the poet captures Lee in Africa, at ease but alert:

u / u / u / / \ u /  
I like to see you lean back in your chair  
u / u / u / u / /  
so far you have to fall but do not—  
u / / u / /  
your arms back, || your fine hands  
u u / / u  
in your print pockets.

/ u u / u u  
Beautiful. || Impudent.  
/ u u /  
Ready for life.  
u / /  
A tied storm.

u / u / u / u \ / /  
I like to see you wearing your boy smile

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<sup>170</sup> Originally published in *Family Pictures*, 1970.

u / u / u / u / u /  
whose tribute is for two of us or three

/ u u /  
Sometimes in life  
/ / u u / u  
things seem to be moving  
u / u /  
and they are not  
u / u /  
and they are not  
/  
there.  
/ u /  
You are there.

u / u u / u u / u  
Your voice is the listened-for music.  
/ / u u u / u / u  
*Your* act is the consolidation.

u / u / u / u / u /  
I like to see you living in the world.

This poem bears many of the hallmarks of Brooks’s later work: the use of free verse, a voice uncluttered by fussy or archaic diction, and the inclusion of a repetition-charged “nucleus.” It functions in a similar manner to the *Annie Allen* poem inspired by Hank in that it celebrates the son-figure; the subject, described as “impudent,” exhibits a necessary defiance and is a risk-taker, both in his physical placement (leaning back so as almost to tip over in his chair) and in the larger context of the world. There is also an acknowledgement of the hardships that hover on the margins; we are reminded in the *Annie Allen* poem that “success” is far from being “sure, infallible.” In this particular

poem, the presented threat is inertia and a lack of engagement from the onlooker (“Sometimes in life / things seem to be moving / and they are not / and they are not / there”). In any event, what differs here is that the poet herself is seen as taking up the action of “reach,” moving risk out of the realm of the domestic (the chaos wrought inside the house) and making reference to how the poem’s subject will make a definitive impact on the world. The poem is about admiration, but it is also about reassurance and protection, how the subject is needed, appreciated and loved. An ironic feature inserts itself in the form of that poetic mainstay that Lee hated perhaps above all others: the use of iambic pentameter. His mentor-cultural mother incorporates in this poem no fewer than four (slightly varied) iambic pentameter lines:

u / u / u / / \ u /  
 I like | to see | you lean | back in | your chair  
 .....  
 u / u / u / u \ / /  
 I like | to see | your wear | ing your | boy smile  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 whose trib | ute is | for two | of us | or three  
 .....  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 I like | to see | you liv | ing in | the world. (1, 8-9, 18)

Coupled with the use of anaphora (“I like”), this use of the pentameter gives the lines a sense of gentle authority; inserted amongst the more colloquial parts of the poem, they seem to “hold up” the argument, like the legs of a table or the walls of a room. We are presented with the image of Lee, the cultural son, being valued for who is is; the speaker

acknowledges that her subject is propelled by inner tensions (“a tied storm”) and yet that he also possesses a childlike element of affection (“boy smile”) that blesses the limited circle (“two of us or three”) that have gained his trust.

The question of writing, reading, and/or teaching poetry in form (and here I refer primarily to forms with European roots) has proved an understandably problematic one for Black writers. Marilyn Nelson, in her essay “Owning the Masters,” counters Audre Lorde’s proclamation, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” by proposing that Black writers should “take possession of . . . the tradition . . . Own the masters, all of them” (Nelson 296) by experimenting with traditional form in order to express those realities which poets like Lorde and Lee had deemed only bridgeable through free verse. It is wise to consider that Nelson’s essay was published in 1995, at the height of the New Formalism movement, which saw a form renaissance of sorts make inroads into American poetics. Twenty-seven years later, racial oppression and violence have continued to assert their hold on society in the form of systemic (educational, judicial, economic) discrimination and brutality at the hands of both the police and ordinary citizenry embracing “vigilante” actions, egged on by the alt-right. In light of this, it is easy to see how Nelson’s proposed strategy might be perceived today as slightly idealistic and reductive. There are no answers, but there are examples; Brooks, schooled in the work of the masters, had the wisdom and presence of mind also to allow herself to be schooled by the youth of her time. The speaker in “Young Heroes II” is the changed Brooks, who is able to both contemplate the authenticity and commitment of the New

Black youth and appreciate the collective need for uncompromising advocacy and action. And yet hidden within is the creature of design and principle who was able to cautiously and sensitively navigate both her own domestic realities and the often hypocritical and treacherous terrain of writing with and for both Blacks and whites and who was subsequently able to “respond to [her] climate.” The Fisk Convention of 1967 had done its work, but the need to address “the love / that has to have a home” had never left Gwendolyn Brooks. She showed—and continues to show—poetry readers and makers how the phenomenon of homeplace could be made manifest in poetic spaces of action, contemplation, and protection which, even as they ultimately refused to “settle for ‘the pretty little thing,’” made their own particular and unforgettable music.

## CONCLUSION

### “Now press. Now stitch. Now billow: splendid”: Form and Domesticity Go into the Future

At the beginning of this dissertation, I briefly mentioned the curious phenomenon of the Tradwife. For anyone interested in finding out more about this particular 21st-century specimen, a visit to Instagram proves illuminating. Here, one will find the Russian blonde in Denmark who dresses her two daughters in ruffled handmade frocks and aprons and declares herself “anti-woke” and champions “Sacred beauty of femininity, handwork & tradition” (Andersen). There is the 39-year-old mother of six who asks her followers, “What are you doing right now to preserve liberty?” (heathersrefinement). In Indiana lives the “Catholic...sassy...freethinker”... who rails against the world’s “playing pandemic” (lifewiththeralls). Amongst the romantic pregnancy portraits and images of babies, pies, and bibles—a world which might have been summed up by Brooks in the pithy phrase “pretty kitchen towels”—are nestled shreds of anti-vaccine rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and memes directed against feminist and pro-choice initiatives. It is a nostalgic dream honed and weaponized in the service of the alt-right. For anyone even vaguely drawn to the validity of domestic practice, the existence of the Tradwife movement is a red flag on the dangers of willingly allying home and gender with political ideology.

As explorations of domesticity have their toxic extremes, so do ventures into formalist poetics carry the baggage of traditionalist associations and affiliations with

reactionary politics.<sup>171</sup> Ira Sadoff, in his acidly entertaining 1990 article “A Dangerous Nostalgia,” unpacks the potential threat of the New Formalism movement that took root in America at the end of the 1980s in response to the free-verse-confessional imperatives of the 1960s and ’70s. He declares the movement “to have a social as well as a linguistic agenda,” pointing out the dangers of privileging the public over the intimate and emphasizing the need to “recognize the dialectical relationship between word and world.” Rather than shooting down form altogether, Sadoff drives home the need for the poet to “articulate form with vision,” reaching outward to address social concerns (here, he aptly names northern British poet Tony Harrison as a benchmark). He also points to the movement’s shocking lack of diversity at the time (7-10).<sup>172</sup> The takeaway from Sadoff’s article is a valid one: that form (and craft in general) cannot be held up as a means of spearheading the primacy of white, European culture. If form is used, it needs to merge with different views and different kinds of music. It must operate with subtlety as well as compassion.

Subtlety and compassion do indeed permeate the works of Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Gwendolyn Brooks; all of these poets succeed in weaving into their poetic practice forms or elements of form that do not distract from their respective engagements

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<sup>171</sup> Examples of poetry taken to its conservative extreme can be found at [www.classicalpoets.org](http://www.classicalpoets.org). A good (read: unintentionally hilarious) beginning would be Joseph Charles Mackenzie’s “Pibroch of the Domhnall: Inaugural Poem for Donald J. Trump.”

<sup>172</sup> Sadoff points out, for example, that Derek Walcott is the only poet of colour featured in Robert Richman’s 1988 anthology *The Direction of Poetry* (8).



with the world at large but rather burnish their expression of it. They also, as we have seen, deal with aspects of the domestic while refusing to prop up ideals that might be seen as patriarchal and/or regressive—indeed, much of their work takes these ideals to task. In both of these tendencies, they are trailblazers. In looking at the work of contemporary female-identified poets, we can divine the influence of Bishop, Sexton, and Brooks, bearing witness to views of both home-seeking/home-keeping and the “housekeeping of form” that embraces complexity, diversity, and inclusivity. As wielded by today’s poets, the use of form to articulate domestic yearnings and anxieties aims not to laud either formal meticulousness or domestic rectitude but rather to examine their relationship from a number of intriguing angles.

One of these angles involves the use of form as a way of establishing and challenging domestic norms. Heralded as one of the young front-runners of the New Formalism movement, Georgia-born poet and critic A.E. Stallings (b. 1968) has produced, since 1999, four books of elegantly-wrought verse that operates at the more orthodox end of the spectrum in terms of its fidelity to received models. In “The Dollhouse,” taken from her 2006 collection *Hapax*, Stallings lays out, in crisp, iambic pentameter couplets, her reminiscences of the titular plaything inherited from an earlier generation. Recalling how she and her sister spent “the towering grown-up hours” (7) engaging with this miniature domestic universe, the poet describes in detail how artifice shapes the background for imaginative exploits, telling the reader about

u / u / u / / / u /  
The lit | tle beds, || | the tin | -foil look | ing glass,  
/ u u / u / u / u /  
Bookcas | es stamped | in ink | upon | the walls,  
(u)/ u / u / u / u /  
Mis | matched chairs | where sat | the joint | ed dolls,  
u / u / u / u / u /  
The clock | whose face, || | no lar | ger than | a dime,  
(u)/ u / u / / u / /  
Had, || | for all | these years, || | kept the | same time. (8-12)

Here, one thinks of Bishop, not only because of the mention of a dummy timepiece which recalls the “play / wrist-watches, / whose hands moved only when they wanted” (9-10) in “Where are the dolls who loved me so...” but also because of the poem’s initial emphasis on establishing regularity. The children, using the discourse of their elders, impose routine on the “jointed” inanimate residents of the dollhouse:

/ u u / u / u / u /  
Now it | is time | to go | to sleep, || | we spoke,  
(u)/ u / u / u / u /  
Par | roting | the talk | of ol | der folk,  
u / u / \ / u / u /  
And laid | the dolls | out ful | ly-clothed | in bed  
/ u u / u / u / u /  
After | their teeth | were brushed, || | and prayers | were said,  
u / u / \ u / / u /  
And flipped | the switch | on the | low-wat | tage sun. (17-21)

However, it is not enough for the children, these gods in miniature who control the “low-wattage sun” itself, to let the night unfold as it must without interruption. In them lurks the same frisson of curiosity that haunts the speaker of Brooks’s “a song in the front

yard”, who peers out from the model home to envision an alternate existence marked by wildness and sensuality. In this case, the children instigate a series of madcap narrative developments that rupture the routine of the everyday:

u / u / u / / u / /  
 But in | the night | we'd have | something | break in,  
 / u u / u \ u / u /  
 Kidnap | the bab | y or | purloin | the pie —  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 A ti | ger, || may | be, || or | a pas | serby —  
 / u u / u / u u / u /(u)  
 Just to | make some | thing hap | pen, || to move | the story.  
 u / u / u / u / u /(u)  
 The dolls | awoke, || | alarmed, | took in | ventory. (22-26)

The metre, hitherto varied only by the occasional initial trochee, spondee or insertion of a half-stress, now features two lines with “tails”—additional final unstressed syllables (“the **story**”; “-ventory”)—that throw these lines ever so slightly out of balance. The impish desire to “make something happen” in the midst of stolid routine, however, has deeper import for grown readers, for it presages the onset of adult experience, where things happen regardless:

u / u / u / u / u /  
 If we | made some | thing hap | pen ev | ery day,  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 Or night, || | it was | the game | we knew | to play,  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 Not re | aliz | ing then | how lives | accrue,  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 With in | terest, || | the smal | lest things | we do. (27-30)

The tone here is measured and ironic, albeit palpably wistful. In the words of Adam Kirsch, Stallings shows the reader/listener how “things fall, not dramatically apart, but unsettlingly askew”; certainly, in following the thread of askewness that runs through the poem, we are given a sense of how domestic experience can exceed or defy our expectations as adults, in ways that are present and yet unnervingly indescribable.

Another angle that formal work can take is where the poem attempts to show the formal initiative called into service in order to serve as a bulwark against those forces and events which defy order. Mary Meriam (b. 1955) is known for both her explorations of queer desire and her work in forms both received and invented. In “Soup,” she represents askewness in the extreme, taking on the voice of a speaker attempting to navigate the recipe of the title while wrestling with the backstory of being apart from their beloved:

spinach: || I was sound asleep, || so I guess the tornadoes passed me by  
asparagus: || snow flurries this morning, || drove to bank anyway  
garlic: || banker forgot his notary stamp  
shallots: || drove banker to get his stamp  
leeks: || banker said mouse was running around the parking lot  
corn: || upset about the snow  
carrots: || no accumulation  
celery: || mailbox empty this morning  
potatoes: || both glad and sad  
cabbage: || washed dishes watched moon rise  
butter: || wondered why moon had missing piece  
bean stock: || heard on radio moon eclipsed tonight  
salt: || forecast says 62 on Monday  
pepper: || thought you should know

Although approaching the sonnet in that it is fourteen lines long, Meriam’s poem casts off both regularity of line length and metrical consistency. The divide between the names of the ingredients at the start of the lines and the words that come after manifests as a column of silence that mirrors not only the separation of two bodies but also interior domestic practice from external happenings in society and nature (the banker and his stamp, the mouse, the moon), reality from romantic expectations, and art from the practical world. Eight of the initial ingredients register as trochaic or spondaic (“**spinach**”; “**garlic**”; “**shallots**”; “**carrots**”; “**cabbage**”; “**butter**”; “**bean stock**”; “**pepper**”), and three are monosyllabic (“**leeks**”; “**corn**”; “**salt**”); this sets up a promise of sonic unity at the start of the lines, establishing the *intention* of process and form as a form unto itself, even as the lines spin out in another direction. “Soup” shows the bravery and creativity inherent in engaging in both the act of domestic doing and the act of articulating how one lives in the world with something or someone missing; in this way, it brings to mind Sexton’s own ability to domesticate emotional trauma<sup>173</sup> while embodying perfectly what Fraiman, in *Extreme Domesticity*, refers to as shelter writing.

Within the shelter of formal poem-spaces, the female-identified poet is also able to use domestic tropes to question fittings/misfittings concerning self-image and relationships. Heavily influenced by music, folklore, and ecology, the work of Appalachian poet Anna Lena Phillips Bell (b. 1978) explores nature, homeplace, and

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<sup>173</sup> In my chapter on Sexton, I speak of how the poet uses form to domesticate madness and the institution. Even though these are not dealt with in the Meriam poem, in my opinion the domesticating impulse still makes itself felt and thus merits a comparison.

human interactions and how we make sense of our belonging with regard to all three. In her sonnet “Stitch,” the poet uses the domestic metaphor of sewing/repairing to unpack the complexity of love:

/ u u / u / u / u /  
 Making | myself | content | with what | was half  
 (u)/ u / u / u / \ /  
 plen | ty, || good | but nev | er what | you’d call.  
 u / u\ u / u / u /  
 fine tail | oring, || I wor | ried out | a hole.  
 u / u / u / / / / / /  
 in what | I knew | of love— || don’t move | too much.  
 u / u / u / u u / u /  
 in this, || your on | ly shirt— || it’ll all | unstitch—  
 u u / / u / u\ u /  
 and the | gap sewed | itself | into | myself.  
 u / u / u / u / u / (u)  
 What’s mis | sing now’s | the feel | of mis | sing something.  
 u / u / u / u\ u /  
 Should I | be war | y, || lack | ing it, | or find  
 u / u / u / u / u /  
 this doub | le ab | sence sweet? || We’ve cut | and pinned.  
 u / u / u / u / u / (u)  
 our piec | es, || we | have ripped | out hems, || unseaming—  
 u / u / u / u / u / (u)  
 but in | our rend | ing, || not | a knot | is sundered  
 u / u / / / / / / / /  
 that we | cannot | baste down, || sew up, || make right.  
 u / u u / u / u / u / /  
 I pinch | all I’ve held | apart— || in case | of what? ||—shut.  
 u / u / u / u / (u)  
 Now press: || now stitch. || Now bil | low: || splendid.

In Brooks’s “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi...”, the housewife of the title finds herself as a character in a flawed narrative full of holes where “the breaks [are]

everywhere” and where she lacks the “thread capable of the necessary / Sew-work” (49-51). In Bell’s poem, the narrator archly laments her own romantic past, in which love was “never what you’d call / fine tailoring” and where she “worried out a hole” in fearing all would unravel. Now she comes face-to-face with an intimacy that has surpassed her expectations, where she almost feels suspicious at the lack of a deficit. Bell’s shaping of the sonnet mirrors this sense-making process. The rhyme scheme (*abbccadeedfggf*) is unconventional, the liberal use of caesurae shows the speaker struggling to internalize the marvellous, and the iambic flow is interrupted by variations including seven spondees/ half-spondees (including one that occurs as part of a double iamb), a headless iamb, two anapaests, an initial trochee, and four extra-syllable “tails.” And yet, there are connections that occur within the lines, signified by repetition (“self”; “missing”; “now”) and internal rhyme/half-rhyme (“love”/“move”; “apart”/“what”/“shut”) as well as the use of alliteration and assonance. Particularly effective are the poem’s last two lines, which seem to enact a miniature dance between the opposing forces of apprehension and liberation: in Line 13, the iambic pentameter base metre is lent tension by the inclusion of an anapaest (“all I’ve **held**”) and a rhyme-inflected final bacchius (“of **what?—shut.**”), before Line 14 shows the speaker following a new set of directives for happiness:

u / u / u / u / (u)  
 Now press: || | now stitch. || | Now bil | low: || splendid.

The last line of Bell's sonnet breaks with the pattern of the whole in that is in iambic tetrameter; however, rather than giving the ending a truncated feel, the omission of the fifth foot admits us to a place where simplicity paradoxically leads the speaker to freedom and release. The fabric of the speaker's love is allowed to "billow"—this breaking free from the joint forms of received poetic patterns and sense of personal judgement recalls Bishop's late poem "Sonnet," in which the "rainbow-bird" escapes

from the narrow bevel  
of the empty mirror,  
flying wherever  
it feels like, gay! (11-14)

Alas, there is no such foreseeable escape in Stephanie Burt's (b. 1971) "Words for Tea Towels," a work which uses the formal poem-space as a site for coming to terms with monotony and disillusionment. As a trans poet, Burt has separate channels of entrapment to explore; her frustration with the narrowness of the suburbs finds expression in a witty and wistful poem which relays, in quatrains made up of alternating lines of trochaic trimeter and dimeter, the oppressive freight of social discourse marked by platitudes and hypocrisy:

/ u / u / u  
Nothing's | worth a | quarrel,  
/ u / u / (u)  
So the | fractious say.  
/ u / u / u  
If they | can per | suade you



/ u / u /(u)  
They can | have their | way.

.....

/ u / u / u  
Nothing's | worth the | bother.  
/ u / u /(u)  
Never | start a | fight;  
/ u / u / u  
If you | feel neg | lected  
/ u / u /(u)  
You've done | something | right. (5-8; 13-16)

“People have good reasons / For the things they do” are the lines which bookend Burt’s poem, emphasizing both the irrationality of human interactions (made common on a domestic level, as laid out in the poem’s title) and the inescapability of the situation. Burt has voiced, in interviews, an admiration of Bishop’s handling of “feelings and craft” (Duff-Strautmann); certainly, we sense echoes here of the longing and frustration inherent in works like “House Guest,” which is also rendered in tight, claustrophobic lines.

Allison Joseph (b. 1967), a Caribbean-British poet transplanted to the United States, has herself mentioned how the trochee, with its telegram-like insistence, “brings out [her] cynical side” (Joseph, email to A. Basekic). In “Parable,” she harnesses the short trochaic line, albeit in couplets, to show a character caught in the grinding gears of domestic routine:

/ u / u / u / u  
Wipe their | noses, || scrub their | fingers,  
/ u / u / u / u  
do their | laundry, || tweeze their | splinters,

/ u / u u / u / u  
buy the | groceries, || | sew on | patches,  
/ u / u / u / u  
while your | hair falls | out in | thatches.

/ u / u / u / u  
Chop the | veggies, || | fry the | bacon,  
/ u / u / u /u  
tell your | girlfriends | they're mis | taken (5-10)

Throughout the course of the poem, the subject's endless labour continues, even as her unnamed "straying" husband makes plans to leave:

/ u / u / u /u  
Watch him | rev the | station | wagon—  
/ u / u / \ / u  
Tires | skidding, || | tailpipe | dragging.

.....

/ u / u / u / u  
nothing | haunts you. || | You don't | shudder,  
/ u / u / u /u  
glad he's | vanished, || | like the | others. (17-18, 25-26)

As with Sexton's "And One for My Dame," we are presented with a narrative involving a woman's abandonment by a partner lured out onto the open road; however, whereas that poem uses tercets incorporating lines of increasing length to focus on the act of gradual estrangement, Joseph keeps hers of equal length, driving home not only the mechanized sameness of domestic routine but also the cyclical nature of such dynamics. The piston-like drive of these claustrophobic lines, matched with the falling, drum-like trochaic

rhythm, channels a spell that cannot be broken, while the final word “others” hints ominously at similar detrimental domestic arrangements to follow.

Natasha Trethewey (b. 1966) is another poet of colour who uses form to show the confinement and discomfort of domestic environments, albeit venturing beyond monotony and unacknowledged drudgery to encompass the theme of violence.<sup>174</sup> In “Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971,” she presents a situation of concealment and fear which unfolds throughout five roughly iambic tetrameter tercets that follow an alternating rhyme scheme. The poem begins with a series of questions that invite us to scrutinize what we remember along with that which we *choose* to remember:

/ u / / u / u /  
Why the | rough edge | of beau | ty? || Why  
u / u / uu / u / (u u)  
the tir | ed face | of a wo | man, || suffering,  
u / uu / u / uu /  
made lum | inous by | the cam | era’s eye?

(u)\ u / u / uu /  
Or | the storm | that drives | us inside  
u / / u \ / \ / (u)  
for days, || | power | lines down, || | food rotting  
\ u u / uu / \ /  
in the | refrig | erator, || while | outside

u / u / uu / u /  
the land | scape glist | ens beneath | a glaze  
u / / u / u / u \  
of ice? || | Why remem | ber an | ything

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<sup>174</sup> Trethewey’s mother was murdered by an abusive partner when the poet was in her twenties. (*Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 9th ed., vol. E 1181.)

(u)\ u / u \ u / /  
 but | the won | der of | those few days,  
  
 u / / / / u u / u /  
 the iced trees, || | each leaf | in its glas | sy case?  
 u / u u / u / / (u)  
 The pic | ture we took | that first morning  
 u / / u / u u / /  
 the front yard | a beaut | iful, || | strange place—  
  
 / u u / u / u / u /  
 why on | the back | has some | one made | a list  
 u u / u / u u / / u  
 of our names, || | the date, || | the event: || | nothing  
 u / u / (u) / u / u u /  
 of what's | inside— || | moth | er, || step | father's fist?

The titular meteorological event traps the family within a house now bereft of electricity but surrounded by a glorious ephemeral beauty—a “landscape that glistens beneath a glaze / of ice”—that suspends individual leaves in a veneer of luminosity and transforms the “front yard” into “a beautiful, strange place.” Using spondaic and bacchic substitutions in the metre (“**rough edge**”; “**lines down**”; “**food rot-**”; “**those few days**”; “**the iced trees**”; “**each leaf**”; “**the front yard**”; “**strange place**”) Trethewey “freezes” time within the progression of the poem’s metre in the first four tercets, making the reader focus on how nature has imposed its own sculptural stasis on nature and objects and, by extension, photographic stasis on collective memory. Our breath is taken away by the beauty, but Trethewey does not allow us to forget what is really happening within the house. The final line of the poem swells to five feet, and a ghost half-iamb after the

second foot adds to the impression of breathlessness and suspense.<sup>175</sup> In addition to metre, the poem's patterning of rhyme helps mark out for the reader/listener the frozen and unchangeable truth. The "envelope" rhymes of each tercet, which carry faint echoes of the terza rima used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy* to present concentric rings of hellishness, morph from stanza to stanza<sup>176</sup> ("why"/"eye"; "inside"/"outside"; "glaze"/"days"; "case"/"place"; "list"/"fist"), but the words that nestle within the "rooms" of each tercet are all connected by slant rhyme ("suffering"; "rotting"; "anything"; "morning"; "nothing"). The reader/listener is given a chance, in Trethewey's poem, to gaze within a formally-constructed "glass house" that offers up a different hellish reality to that presented by the photograph mentioned in the title. A metamorphosis has taken place within the poem (making us think back to Brooks), but there is a core truth to the situation that we cannot ignore. Trethewey uses form, in this instance, not to prop up the idea of "the pretty little thing" which Brooks had identified as being detrimental to a powerful and responsive Black poetics, but to point out a) how trauma stuns our ability to reckon with the present and the past (here, we recall Bishop's "The Imaginary Iceberg") and b) how the presence of the narcotic allure of beauty can undermine or distract from the acute danger that faces

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<sup>175</sup> I have identified similar "ghost half-iamb" in Sexton's "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" (Lines 45 and 54) as well as Brooks's "hunchback girl: she thinks of heaven" (Line 8) and "Life for my child is simple and is good..." (Line 2). Others may argue with my scansion here, but I feel this to be the most fitting with regard to the poem's overall rhythmic structure.

<sup>176</sup> Thanks go out to my supervisor Dr. Jeffery Donaldson for pointing out this connection between Trethewey's use of the triplet and Dante's use of terza rima.

women in abusive home situations. In short, Trethewey's poem serves as both a personal reflection and a veiled *ars poetica*-related caveat for anyone considering the dressing of memory in art (and, by extension, form).

Given this caveat about the distractions of beauty, what has my purpose been in writing a dissertation about the use of form and the search for home? Has it been to assign new, unsought biographical dimensions to Bishop, Sexton, and Brooks and their respective practices? Has it been to establish myself as a champion of form and impose a regressive spectre of conservatism onto who these women were and how they processed the world? Has it been to show off my own supposed repertoire of Bletchley Park-esque code-breaking skills? My answer is categorically no on all counts. I stress again that I have approached this study as a late arrival to academia, who became curious, after thirty years as a poet working in form, about how certain structures made their way into discussions of home and home-seeking. As a reader and an apprentice, teasing out of the work of Bishop, Sexton, and Brooks formal patterns, insertions, and ruptures and examining how all of these intersected with themes of the domestic, I am instead attempting to find a new way of thinking *with* this work, divining not absolutes but rather possibilities that inform my personal interpretation and overall enjoyment of these poems. As a maker of verse and someone who encourages other makers, I am spurred on by the potential of considering visual and aural structure during the writing process, both in the work produced by my students and peers and in my own poems. When I revisit home or imagine a parallel dwelling, either from dream or waking desire, and attempt to put it in

verse, I am pulled into the mystery of how the stanzas and lines—those rooms and corridors—lead onto each other, what tensions and longings brew within their walls.

That being said, my greatest hope is that my examination of these poems will not remain solely a personal exercise borne of curiosity and/or a desire to celebrate the “traditional” or the arcane but rather one that leads to a broadening of vision beyond the bounds of form, the domestic, and the individual poet. I believe that the spatial and aural shaping of verse has not only the potential to build poetic sites of comfort and resistance but also the ability to forge bonds between practitioners. It is worth stressing that another valuable quality of form is that it creates community by allowing itself to reach out further into the public sphere as an accessory to performance. From a purely functional standpoint, the use of metre, rhyme, and/or stanzaic configurations (to name just a few components) can assist the performing poet who chooses to deliver poetry by heart and add to the audience’s enjoyment. For the writer whose aims veer towards satire or even stand-up comedy, the contrasting of strict forms with mundane, anarchistic, or absurd subject matter can elicit laughter in spades.<sup>177</sup> However, there is a spectrum of both intention and effect connected to poets who perform formal work. I have already spoken of the winning, timorous, self-apologetic delivery of Bishop and the ritualistic, near-bombastic rockstar offerings of Sexton. But I have saved mention of Brooks’s performance style for the very end as a way of emphasizing how powerful the slightest

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<sup>177</sup> This author guiltily admits to having used metre in such a fashion during her slam poetry career in the mid to late 1990’s.

modulations in delivery can be. “We Real Cool,”<sup>178</sup> arguably the poet’s most anthologized work, was inspired by her accidental encounter with seven small boys playing pool in a bar during a school day. The work is deceptively simple on the page: four rhyming couplets, syntactically shuffled so that each line ends with the collective subject pronoun:

/ / / /  
We real cool. || We  
/ / / /  
Left school. || We  
  
/ / / /  
Lurk late. || We  
/ / / /  
Strike straight. || We  
  
/ / / /  
Sing sin. || We  
/ / / /  
Thin gin. || We  
  
/ / / /  
Jazz June. || We  
/ / / /  
Die Soon

If one were to read this poem “as is,” the work would transmit, through the use of the monosyllabic word choices and the absence of unstressed syllables (the poem is made up of a single dispondee in Line 1, a single molossus in Lines 2 to 6, and a single spondee in Line 8) as a dull, plodding march. However, listening to Brooks read the poem *aloud*

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<sup>178</sup> *BE*.



reveals dynamism and empathy. Here, I have transcribed the poem to show where Brooks lays emphasis, using an uploaded Academy of American Poets recording as a guide:

We REEEEEAL coool. (*Quick, breathy*) We  
Left school. (*Quick, breathy*) We

Lllurk llate, (*Quick, breathy*) We  
Strike straight. (*Quick, breathy*) We

Siiing siiiiiin. (*Quick, breathy*) We  
Thiiiiin gin. (*Quick, breathy*) We

Jaaaaazz June. (*Quick, breathy*) We  
Die soon.

The “We” that concludes each line is marked by a quickly indrawn breath, making it but a hiccupy whisper in contrast to the puffed-out declarative feel of the verb phrase that precedes it. Brooks modulates her pitch throughout, adding variety and interest to the performance while showing that which rumbles under the surface. The young speakers of the poem are—as indicated by the faint breathlessness of the delivery of the “We” pronoun—still young, half-made. They define themselves through their rebellious behaviour (shown by the theatrical emphasis placed on the verb phrases), but the pitch rises and falls in the way a preteen boy’s voice rises and falls. Brooks’s view of these youngsters is that of the observer-poet but also that of the roaming surrogate mother who emerged from her South Side home to protect and inspire the Black youth who needed her (and whom she needed and learned from in return). In the hands (and voice) of Brooks, the formal poem becomes a thing held up to the light, through which care, admiration,

non-patronizing wisdom, and social engagement are permitted to shine. For the poet of today who admires the practices of (for example) Staceyann Chin, Erica Dawson, Amanda Gorman, Warsan Shire, Patricia Smith, or Kae Tempest and wants to deliver the poem from the page to the stage, it is useful to remember that traditional forms can be amplified and made fresh through modern approaches and playful experimentation, giving the poem a chance to not only “respond to its climate” but also challenge its own structure, soaring up over the walls of the house and bringing listeners together in a “home” of mutual understanding, wrought by oral tradition.

The notion of home varies from person to person; it can be an actual house, a room, or a shelter for those in flight from violence. It can be an airport or a place of worship or an office or a school. What differentiates a house from a home is the acknowledgement of the animation and the sense-seeking that stirs the whole and generates fresh energy in those who read the poem or hear it or, indeed, who find themselves writing it. This dissertation is prefaced, in an epigraph, by a quote from Gaston Bachelard, who, in discussing the nature of shells (those polished miracles which encase but also emerge from soft, vital bodies), states that “it is perfectly natural that life, which is the cause of forms, should create living forms” (133). A formal poem should not merely contain life and force it to adapt to its dimensions, ordering its components according to a mandate of “housekeeping.” Rather, it should also take into consideration “homekeeping”—that is to say, the life within—and allow the poem-space to go beyond artifact status and keep (and spread) its vitality. My final emphatic statement is that form

is a fluid entity borne of fluid currents of inspiration; as there is no one motive for seeking and keeping house and seeking safety, so there is no one motive for allowing sonic and visual unity to permeate one's poeticized expression of thought. In choosing to spend time with Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and Gwendolyn Brooks and invite my readers to do the same, it has been my most cherished intention not only to point out the music that echoes in these poets' literal and figurative "houses" but also to prime the ears of others for what strains, what phantom chords, echo within their own.

EPILOGUE: HER MUSTANG

*For J.H.O.*

He promised she would have a stuccoed house,  
a flag, a fountain, a flight of blood-wood stairs,  
a tree for cherries, another for Anjou pears,  
winters down in Aspen, just because.  
There was a pond of bulging copper koi,  
a spray of rhododendron at the gate,  
a gardener she swore was worth his weight  
in glads; the au pairs (too refined to stay).  
But, in the halls, the light suspended motes  
like locusts pausing to destroy the field,  
the sprinkler chattered horrors in the dusk  
as sparrows tore at one another's throats.  
Her children wouldn't wash or nap or yield;  
she knew them all too well to even ask.

She oversaw the tray of morning tea,  
stood, bleached with sun, to watch his car pull out,  
received the caterers, gave serious thought  
to osso bucco, Cherries Jubilee,  
swept dust from the Varley's gilded frame,  
drank Metrecal with Seagram's. Fell asleep,  
grew older, every time Emil would quip  
about the way the dinners stayed the same  
or why she had to nap or drink or cry  
as the maples shed their sludge and the wet snow fell  
and the purple sky sat heavily and stared  
at no one. And twenty more years went by.  
The children grew and left, as children will,  
and television taught her to be scared.

And now she sits in the plush and airy suite,  
gasping onto the skyline of the young,  
vaguely alarmed to find herself among  
the old. I never knew her to be sweet  
but, poking my strudel, ask her how she slept,  
how she likes her crafting or *The Crown*.

I haven't touched on how I let her down  
or where we were when the hope inside her snapped,  
when the men laughed warmly when she got things wrong  
or snickered when she sashayed through a room,  
when the golden child grew up and robbed her blind.  
I want her to pack and leave, climb into her Mustang  
one morning in '75 (clogs, perfume),  
drive off, and leave the mess we are behind.

By Alexandra Oliver (*Hail, the Invisible Watchman*, Biblioasis, 2022)<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Alexandra Oliver is my maiden name and the name under which I publish.

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