

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

## From Writers at Work: The "Paris Review" Interviews

*Once again, most amateur writers don't realize how much sheer grunt work goes into finished writing, and these few words say it dramatically.*

INTERVIEWER: How much rewriting do you do?

HEMINGWAY: It depends. I rewrote the ending of *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

INTERVIEWER: Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?

HEMINGWAY: Getting the words right.

BRETT CANDLISH MILLIER

## Elusive Mastery The Drafts of Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art"

*Brett Candlish Millier, a professor at Middlebury College, and the author of Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It has gathered and analyzed the seventeen drafts of Bishop's magnificent poem "One Art," which, in its first draft, was rather ordinary. Watching over Bishop's shoulder as she works and reworks it, seeing the poem develop through its many versions, is both a rare opportunity and a useful writing lesson. Millier's analysis of Bishop's writing process is also a fine example of the best kind of literary scholarship. This essay has convinced both my writing clients and me that judgments of our first drafts, of poetry or prose, are irrelevant, that what we need to do with our writing is to keep going, keep revising, keep moving the work toward what it is meant to be.*

IN THE ELEVEN YEARS which passed between the publication of her volumes *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *Geography III* (1976), Elizabeth Bishop suffered such losses that it must have seemed to her that her life was ending very much as it had begun—in fear, uncertainty and solitude. As a child, she had lost her father before she knew him when he died of Bright's disease

eight months after she was born. Her mother was deeply disoriented by her husband's death, and spent the next five years in and out of mental institutions, until, in 1916, she was diagnosed as permanently insane. Her five-year-old daughter would never see her again. Little Elizabeth had managed, with the uncanny adaptability of a child, to construct herself a secure world in the home of her maternal grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia. But her father's wealthy Boston family, worried that their only grandchild would grow up backward there among the ignorant, uprooted her a year later and she began what would become a lifetime of living as a guest in other people's homes. In 1967, the most secure of these guest homes, in Petrópolis, Brazil, had been violently disrupted when her hostess, friend and lover of fifteen years suffered a breakdown and committed suicide, and Bishop was once again cast out. She landed, awkwardly, at Harvard University, in September, 1970. In the fall of 1975, the young woman who was the saving grace of Bishop's years in Cambridge sought to break their ties, and Bishop was again devastated. As if to address this renewed sense of loss, the poems of *Geography III*, written for the most part in Cambridge in the years following Lota Soares's death, are "carefully revealed" elegies. The combination of age (Elizabeth turned 60 in 1971), poor health, alcoholism, the radical displacement forced upon her by the circumstances of Soares's suicide and her own financial condition begin to account for the weighty melancholy of these final poems. For a while, perhaps, she thought she would write no more poetry. Throughout the manuscripts, correspondence and galley proofs of her 1969 *Complete Poems*, the title of the volume alternated between "complete" and "collected," as if Elizabeth were weighing the likelihood that she would continue to write.

Later, in the long, slow process of gathering poems for her next

book, *Geography III*, Bishop promised her publisher a long piece with the working title *Elegy*. When she did not finish the poem in time, she decided it would be book-length itself, and indicated on a 1977 Guggenheim Foundation application that this, and a new volume called *Grandmother's Glass Eye*, would be her project. Only the barest outline of *Elegy* is left among Bishop's papers. It indicates that she planned to write the poem "in sections, some anecdotal, some lyrical different lengths—never more than two short pages." The poem was to be an elegy for Lota Soares, for her "reticence and pride," her "heroism brave and young"; her "beautiful colored skin"; "the gestures (which you said you didn't have)." And also for specific memories: "the door slamming, plaster-falling—the cook and I laughing helplessly"; for her "courage to the last, or almost the last—"; "regret and guilt, the nighttime horrors, the WASTE." Bishop never finished *Elegy*, although among her papers there is a very rough draft of a short poem called "Aubade and Elegy," apparently written in 1969 or 1970. It mourns Soares in terms of two great facts of Brazilian life: "No coffee can wake you no coffee can wake you / no coffee / No revolution can catch your attention." The poem recalls the lichens of Bishop's first poem for Soares, "The Shampoo" (1955): "No your life slowed then to that of the lichens circles, then of the rocks." It ends with a sad inventory of Lota's "things": "Oh God, the yellow hat."

Despite the fact that among these rough notes are several important words and ideas that turned up later in "One Art"—notably "gestures" and jokes and the pain of losing "things"—the villanelle does not replace that lost book-length elegy, but incorporates it. There is no doubt that the crisis behind this poem was the apparent loss to Elizabeth of Alice Methfessel, the companion, caretaker, secretary and great love of the last eight years of

her life. While its method is the description of the accumulation of losses in the poet's life, its occasion and subject is the loss of Alice. "One Art" is an exercise in the art of losing, a rehearsal of the things we tell ourselves in order to keep going, a speech in a brave voice that cracks once in the final version and cracked even more in the early drafts. The finished poem may be the best modern example of a villanelle, and shares with its nearest competitor, Theodore Roethke's justly famous "The Waking"—"I wake to sleep and take my waking slow"—the feeling that in the course of writing or saying the poem the poet is giving herself a lesson, in waking, in losing. Bishop's lines share her ironic tips for learning to lose and to live with loss.

### One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

(*Complete Poems* 178)

More than once in the drafts of Bishop's published poems, one finds that she came to express in the final draft nearly the opposite of what she started out to say. As Barbara Page has pointed out, for example, in the seven available drafts of her poem "Questions of Travel," Bishop develops the key line of the final stanza from an early "The choice perhaps is not great . . . but fairly free" to its final "The choice is never wide and never free," as the poet comes to realize restrictions which bind the traveler by articulating them in the poem, (Page 55–57). The very late poem "Santarem," which describes from an eighteen-year distance a stop on Bishop's 1960 trip down the Amazon River, offers a similar development. In the final version of that poem, Bishop describes the confluence of "two great rivers," the Tapajós and the Amazon, and remembers that she was enchanted by this coming together. The last lines of the central stanza read in the final draft:

Even if one were tempted  
to literary interpretations  
such as: life / death, right / wrong, male / female  
—such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off  
in that watery, dazzling dialectic.

(*Complete Poems* 185)

The earliest drafts of this poem show that Bishop was at first concerned, in trying to articulate the emotion she felt in seeing the conflux of two great rivers, with choosing between them, between the literary interpretations she dismisses in the final version. The poem originally evaluated, as "Questions of Travel" had, the traveler's possibility for "choice"; the resolution the conflux first offered was the chance to decide: "Choice—a choice! That evening one might choose," she wrote in the first draft. In the final draft, even the idea of choice has disappeared and the place offers only resolution, as the poet lets go of her need to choose.

Something similar occurs within the seventeen available drafts of "One Art." Bishop conceived the poem as a villanelle from the start, and the play of "twos" within it—two rivers, two cities, the lost lover means not being "two" any more—suggests that the two-rhyme villanelle is a form appropriate to the content. Bishop told an interviewer that after years of trying to write in that form, the poem just came to her. "I couldn't believe it—it was like writing a letter" (Spires 64). A letter with seventeen drafts, perhaps. The poem does seem to have been written over a period of about two weeks—ending on November 4, 1975—much shorter than her usual period of composition.

The first extant draft is a series of partly worked-up notes, apparently a basis for developing the rhymes and refrains of the final version. Its overall thematic shape is familiar in the final poem, with the evidence of the speaker's experience at losing followed by a somewhat strained application of that experience. In its unedited catalog of losses, it is heartbreaking to read.

The draft is tentatively titled "HOW TO LOSE THINGS," then "THE GIFT OF LOSING THINGS," and finally, "THE ART OF LOSING THINGS." (The title "One Art" appears to

have been arrived at very late in the process; none of the other drafts is titled.) It begins with the suggestion that the way to acquire this art is to "begin by mislaying" several items that remain in the final draft—keys, pens, glasses. Then she says,

—This is by way of introduction. I really want to introduce myself—I am such a fantastically good at losing things  
I think everyone should profit from my experiences.

She then lists her qualifications: "You may find it hard to believe, but I have actually lost / I mean lost, and forever, two whole houses." Among her other losses: "A third house, . . . / I think, 'mis-laid' . . . / . . . I won't know for sure for some time," "one peninsula and one island. . . . / a small-sized town . . . and many smaller bits of geography or scenery / a splendid beach, and a good-sized bay. . . . // a good piece of one continent / and another continent—the whole damned thing!" In the end, she writes:

One might think this would have prepared me for losing one average-sized not especially exceptionally beautiful or dazzlingly intelligent person (except for blue eyes) (only the eyes were exceptionally beautiful and the hands looked intelligent) the fine hands  
But it doesn't seem to have, at all. . . .

The draft trails off with "He who loseth his life, etc.—but he who / loses his love—never, no never never never again—." In Elizabeth's handwriting in the margins of this typed draft

are notations about possible rhymes for the villanelle, including "ever / never / forever," "geography / scenery" and a version of her final choice, involving "intelligent," "continent," "sent," "spent," and "lent." This catalog served to set the terms for working into the form. By the second draft, the poem is an incomplete villanelle with "The art of losing isn't hard to master" as the first line, and the "no disaster" play in the third line. The final stanza is crossed out, though legible under the scoring is "But your loss spelt disaster." The marginalia, handwritten like the draft, consist of more work on rhyme and suggest other directions in which Bishop might have taken the poem. One set—"gesture," "protestor," "attestor," "foster," "boaster"—suggests a possible angry, almost litigious response to loss, and the words "evident" and "false" are set to one side of the scribbled-over final stanza, ready to be worked in.

The following drafts work mostly on the first four stanzas, whittling the catalog of losses into a discreet and resonant form and setting the rhyme scheme firmly. It is not until the fifth draft, which consists otherwise of a simple list of end-rhymes, that Bishop once again breaks her controlled tone in the final stanza. Here the original refrain is dutifully repeated, but the poetic frame, for a moment, won't bear the emotional weight:

The art of losing's not so hard to master

~~But won't help in~~ think of that disaster

No—I am lying—

This transformation of the "false" / "evident" play into "lying" is Bishop's first major change aimed at solving to her logical, emotional and aesthetic satisfaction the problem of how the experience of losing car keys, houses, and continents could apply in

handling this truly, as she perceived it now, disastrous loss. In the sixth draft, the final stanza reads: "The art of losing's not so hard to master / until that point & then it / fails & is disaster—" The poem bogs down here; the seventh draft stops short of the final stanza and the eighth is sketchy, with such lines as "losses nobody can master" and "the art of losing's not impossible to master / It won't work . . ."—most of which are crossed out.

Apparently some time passed between the eighth and ninth drafts, for all of the later attempts are typed and contain completed versions of all six stanzas. In the ninth, Bishop develops in the last stanza a more complete version of the "lying" theme: "All that I write is false, it's evident / The art of losing isn't hard to master. / oh no. / anything at all anything but one's love. (Say it: disaster.)" The formalized spontaneity of "(Say it: disaster.)" enables the poem to accommodate the overflow of emotion which had, to this point, disarrayed the final stanza and made the villanelle's ritual repetitions inadequate to manage the emotional content. Bishop was fond of this technique of self-interruption or self-revision in a poem. She learned it from Gerard Manley Hopkins and from Baroque sermon writers, and spoke of it as "portraying the mind in action."

The next version of the final stanza begins with the first real exploration of possible code words which might stand for "you," a phrase or aspect which would bring the lover wholly into the poem. The line is: "But, losing you (eyes of the Azure Aster)" — recalling the "remarkable" blue eyes of the first draft. This awkward and self-consciously poetic phrase would hang in through several drafts, until both its awkwardness and Bishop's need to generalize caused her to discard it for the more discreet and more melodious "gesture," which had been haunting the edges of the final stanza in the previous few drafts. Here, in the tenth, the idea

is still that "I've written lies above" (which she has crossed out in pencil, with "above's all lies" written in) and "the art of losing isn't hard to master / with one exception. (Say it.) That's disaster." In draft eleven, the final stanza is reworked five times and the last line becomes, as Bishop had written and crossed out in the previous draft, "with one exception. (*Write it.*) Write 'disaster.'" Here both words in the phrase "write it" are italicized, as they would be until the poem was collected in *Geography III*—a slight but significant alteration of tone. The change in her means of affirmation or validation from "say it" to "write it" is the crux that, once solved, let the poem speak its curiously independent truth.

For midway through the twelfth draft, quite abruptly, "above's all lies" becomes "above's not lies" and then "I haven't lied above." And yet, still, "the art of losing wasn't hard to master / with this exception (*Write it!*) this disaster." This draft reworks the last stanza four tortured times and clearly wavers on whether or not "above's all lies," and on whether this loss is an example or an exception. Versions of both feelings are tried and crossed out and even the parenthetical outburst, "write it" alternates with "oh isn't it?" a disaster. What remains is the idea that whatever the brave speech, or the possibilities for mastery, this loss still looks like disaster.

The thirteenth draft is the last which thoroughly reworks the final stanza, and it is at this point that the "gesture" becomes a "special voice," then a "funny voice" and finally the "joking voice." There are two tentative versions of the ending. First:

And losing you now (~~a special voice, a gesture~~)  
 doesn't mean I've lied. It's evident  
 the loss of love is possible to master,  
 even if this looks like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

And, mostly crossed out,

In losing you I haven't lied above. It's evident  
 ...

The loss of love is something ~~one must master~~  
 even if it looks like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Firmly in place is the idea that this apparent disaster does not mean that losing can't after all be mastered, even though when Bishop sat down to write the poem the first time, it must have seemed that it did. In the fourteenth draft, the words "not too hard to master" indicate Bishop's approach to the final version—the colloquial tone is a trademark of her polished style. The Vassar-numbered fifteenth draft makes few changes in the poem—notably in line two "so many things seem really to be meant" to be lost becomes "so many things seem filled with the intent to be lost." The draft is typed and has an almost-finished version of the final stanza—though handwritten notes show her still struggling with how to express the "above's not lies" idea—"these were not lies" is the typed version; the handwritten notes offer "I still ~~do~~ can't lie" and "I still won't lie." The draft that Frank Bidart has seems to be a cleanly typed carbon version of draft 15, with changes dictated to Bidart over the telephone by Bishop. The two major changes are the "filled with the intent to be lost" change, and, as is not in the version labeled "draft 15" at Vassar, in the second line of the final stanza, "these were not lies" becomes the now seemingly inevitable "I shan't have lied." What is odd about this late change is that "I shan't have lied" is technically in the future perfect tense. The phrase retains the past-tense sense of "I haven't lied above"—referring to the list of mastered losses in the rest of the poem—yet also poses a possible

resolution in the future: "after I come to terms with this loss, then I won't have lied, but right now I don't know." The most significant ramification of the change to "I shan't have lied" is that it reminds us forcefully that this poem is a crisis lyric in the truest sense—"Even losing you" comes to mean "Even if I lose you"—and we know that this is not emotion recollected in tranquility, but a live, as it were, moment of awful fear, with relief only a hoped-for possibility.

One way to read Bishop's modulation from "the loss of you is impossible to master" to something like "I may yet master this loss even though it looks like disaster" is that in the writing of such a disciplined, demanding poem ("Write it!") lies a piece of the mastery of the loss. Working through each of her losses—from the bold, painful catalog of the first draft to the finely honed and privately meaningful final version—is the way to overcome them; or, if not to overcome them, then to see the way in which one might possibly master *oneself* in the face of loss. It is all, perhaps, "one art"—elegy-writing, mastering loss, mastering grief, self-mastery. The losses in the poem are real: time, in the form of the "hour badly spent" and, more tellingly for the orphaned Elizabeth, "my mother's watch"; the lost houses, in Key West, Petrópolis and, the one still in doubt, Ouro Preto, Brazil. The city of Rio de Janeiro and the whole South American continent were lost to her with Lota Soares's suicide. And currently, in the fall of 1975, she thought she had lost her dearest friend and lover, she of the blue eyes and fine hands. Yet each version of the poem distanced the pain a little more, depersonalized it, moved it away from the tawdry self-pity and "confession" that Bishop disliked in many of her contemporaries. The effect of reading all these drafts together one often feels in reading the raw material of her poems and then the poems themselves: the tremendous selectivity

of her method and her gift for forcing richness from minimal words. An example is how, in the first draft of "One Art," the lines "I am such a / fantastic ly good at losing things / I think everyone shd. profit from my experiences" introduce her list of "qualifications." In the final version the two words "And look!" serve the same purpose.

Elizabeth's letters to her doctor, a brilliant woman then in her seventies, describe the despair of the fall of 1975. Elizabeth was sure she had lost the last person on earth who loved her. The letters agonize over her prospect of a lonely old age, crowded with fans and students and hangers-on, but empty of love. Out of this despair, apparently, came the villanelle "One Art." But my reading of the poem still wants to make it Bishop's elegy for her whole life, despite its obvious origins. Elizabeth apologized to her friends for the poem, saying "I'm afraid its a sort of tear-jerker"—clearly she was somewhat uncomfortable with even this careful approach to the confessional. It is well known that her friends remained for a long time protective of her personal reputation, and unwilling to have her grouped among lesbian poets or even among the other great poets of her generation—I'm thinking of Robert Lowell, Roethke, and John Berryman—as they self-destructed before their readers' eyes. Elizabeth herself taught them this reticence by keeping her private life very private indeed, and by investing what "confession" there was in her poems deeply in objects and places, thus deflecting biographical inquiry. In the development of this poem, discretion is a poetic method and a part of a process of self-understanding, the seeing of a pattern in one's own life.

The poem arose from an immediate crisis, but Bishop's papers and correspondence reveal that its elements had been with her for a long time. Her letters to Frani Blough Muser reveal that

the two teenaged, then college-aged, girls had a kind of running joke about losing things—a letter of September 5, 1929, includes the following lines, apparently written by the eighteen-year-old Elizabeth, after Longfellow: “Lives of great men will remind us / We can mold life as we choose, / And departing leave behind us / Towels, safety pins and shoes.” A couple of years later, as Elizabeth contemplated a walking tour of Newfoundland, she had hopes of visiting the remote village of St. Anthony, “for after all, isn’t St. Anthony the patron of lost articles?” (8 July 1932). As it turned out, they couldn’t get there; the village was “practically inaccessible.” To Ilse and Kit Barker on October 6, 1960, Bishop wrote, referring to letters missing in the Brazilian mails, “I have a feeling some things have been lost in both directions—but now probably we’ll never get it straightened out until all things are straightened out in eternity—at least that might be one way of filling up eternity, finding lost and mislaid articles.” More humorously, after the poem was published, Elizabeth temporarily lost her writing case in a Boston taxicab. To the Barkers she wrote, on 28 August 1976, “oh why did I ever write that cursed villanelle.”

The joking voice, which people who knew both women tell me evokes its owner as surely as blue eyes would have done, is as well something that recurs in Elizabeth’s life, that she loved in nearly all her friends and lovers, all the people whose loss had schooled her in the art of losing, and whose losses are implied in the catalog of “things” in the poem. A letter written to Anne Stevenson on January 8, 1964, predicts the poem:

I have been very lucky in having had, most of my life, some witty friends,—and I mean real wit, quickness, wild fancies, remarks that make one cry with laughing. . . . The

aunt I liked best was a very funny woman: most of my close friends have been funny people; Lota de Macedo Soares is funny. Pauline Hemingway (the 2nd Mrs. H.) a good friend until her death in 1951 was the wittiest person, man or woman, I’ve ever known. Marianne [Moore] was very funny—[E.E.] Cummings, too, of course. Perhaps I need such people to cheer me up.

The “joking voice,” the gesture Elizabeth loved (and, in fact, employed) she loved in Alice, she had loved in Lota Soares, she loved in these other friends dead and gone—the phrase brings them all into the poem. In Bishop’s distillation of immediate crisis into enduring art, the lesson in losing becomes even more a lesson one learns over and over, throughout one’s life. The tentative resolution offered in the poem was not, alas, a real one; Elizabeth struggled terribly with this loss for months afterward. Only the lost one’s return solved it. The poem is a wish for resolution, or a resolution in the sense of a determination, to survive—“I will master this loss; I *will*.”\* It is also a means of assessing the true magnitude of the present disaster in the middle of the crisis, a kind of “How bad is it?” question. And it explores the means of having one’s loss and mastering it, too—which is the privilege of the elegist.

\*The *Oxford English Dictionary* devotes several closely printed pages to the distinction between “will” and “shall,” and reports, significantly, that “In the first period, *shall* has, from the early ME period, been the normal auxiliary for expressing mere futurity, without any adventitious notion a) of events conceived as independent of the speaker’s volition. . . . b) of voluntary action or its intended result. . . . Further, *I shall* often expresses a determination in spite of opposition, and *I shall not* (colloq. *I shan’t*) a peremptory refusal” (p. 152).



## WORKS CITED

With exceptions as noted, all of the Elizabeth Bishop manuscripts quoted in this essay are among her papers at the Vassar College Library, and are reproduced exactly as she left them. They are quoted here with permission of the Library and its curator of Special Collections, Nancy McKechnie; and with the permission of Alice Methfessel, executrix of Bishop's literary estate.

- Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983. ("One Art," and the lines from "Santarém," are quoted with the permission of the publisher.)
- . Letters to Frani Blough Muser. Vassar College Library. Poughkeepsie, New York. Quoted with permission from Nancy McKechnie, and Alice Methfessel.
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PETER ELBOW

## Options for Getting Feedback

*Reading these few densely packed pages by a teacher and writer who's taught more writers than most people, you'll learn new things about how to gather data from other readers to help you revise your work. In this piece from his book Writing with Power, Elbow gets at the nitty-gritty of using feedback, including these very important suggestions: that you not apologize in advance when you give your draft to another reader, and that you think about how much negative feedback you can actually use, before you ask people to tell you everything they think is wrong with your work—good advice!*

THESE IS NO SINGLE OR RIGHT WAY to get feedback. In this chapter I will describe the advantages and disadvantages of various options. At the end I will suggest one process I believe is particularly valuable: getting feedback regularly in a writing support group.

- You can get feedback from one person or several. If you really want to know how your words affect readers, you can't trust feedback from just one person, no matter how expert or experienced she is. Besides it is somehow empowering to realize how diverse and even contradictory the reactions are of different readers to your one set of words. It's confusing at first but it releases