

Questions of Travel – Elizabeth Bishop

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.

-For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
aren't waterfalls yet,
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be.

But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,
the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
slime-hung and barnacled.

Think of the long trip home.

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?

Where should we be today?

Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?

What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life
in our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around?

The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?

To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,
inexplicable and impenetrable,

at any view,

instantly seen and always, always delightful?

Oh, must we dream our dreams

and have them, too?

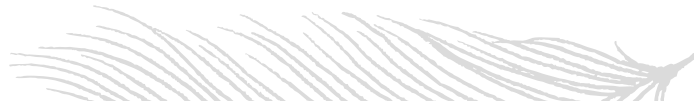
And have we room



for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the trees along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty,
not to have seen them gesturing
like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
--Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
of disparate wooden clogs
carelessly clacking over
a grease-stained filling-station floor.
(In another country the clogs would all be tested.
Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
--A pity not to have heard
the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
who sings above the broken gasoline pump
in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
three towers, five silver crosses.
--Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
blurr'dly and inconclusively,
on what connection can exist for centuries
between the crudest wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.
--Never to have studied history in
the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.
--And never to have had to listen to rain
so much like politicians' speeches:
two hours of unrelenting oratory
and then a sudden golden silence
in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:





*"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?"*

Continent, city, country, society:

the choice is never wide and never free.

*And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?"*



"The title poem, "Questions of Travel," was first published in 1956, about four years after Elizabeth had taken up residence in Brazil. The tourist has now become the passionate observer and, in a sense, has lost her innocence. The poem is a wonderful mosaic of things that one can see and hear along a Brazilian highway." - From Ashley Brown, "Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil" 1977

The poem becomes an interiorized debate - the two voices are less separate characterizations than they are a compound self that interrogates itself and reveals, not affirmation, but doubt. ... James McCorkle, "Concordances and Travels: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop." 1989