

THE ALCHEMY OF ABSENCE

Address by Ellen Gordon Reeves AB 1983, Ed.M. 1986

Delivered at the Radcliffe Commemorative Service, June 6, 2008

Good morning and welcome, Dean Grosz, Karen Klein, fellow alumnae, friends of Radcliffe and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, classmates, roommates, family members, and distinguished guests.

This is a morning about loss, but it needn't be a morning of mourning. We're here to reflect on the lives of the Alumnae and friends who are no longer with us, who have graced the college and the Institute with their presence. They are no longer here and yet they are always with us, thanks to the magic of memory, the alchemy of absence.

A story.

In the fall of 1979, soon after I arrived as a freshman, I saw a poster affirming the Harvard of my adolescent fantasies: the former Poet Laureate of the United States, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Elizabeth Bishop—whose poems I had read in high school—would be reading in person at Sanders Theater. I asked around but none of my new friends would go with me: when I checked the date this year—October 6—I realize it was not only just two weeks after we came to campus, but it was also a Saturday night, and not all my fellow freshmen were making a beeline for the poetry readings. I resolved to go by myself, and, feeling incredibly brave, made the solo trek across the Yard from Matthews to Sanders Theater.

When I arrived, an odd chaos reigned. As people flooded in, shock and tears prevailed as the news spread: Elizabeth Bishop had died that very day, in her Boston home. What I didn't know until I revisited that night this year is that the evening was a benefit for the literary journal *Ploughshares* and that the Irish writer Mary Lavin was on her way to Boston to read with Bishop. The writer Rosellen Brown, who, in fact, had been a Bunting Fellow in 1974, was to introduce her.

In an article she wrote in 2001, Brown remembers being in her garden when the call came from DeWitt Henry, *Ploughshares'* founding editor. "Of course you'll call off the reading," Brown remembers saying. But she writes, "The situation was more complicated than mere good taste and a moment for sorrow would allow. Lavin, who would not fly, was aboard the QE II and could not be stopped en route, and how in the world could they simply tell her the event was cancelled and her many weeks of travel here and back were for naught? The evening would proceed."

And so the reading I had so naively stumbled upon became an impromptu memorial service, one of many historic moments in the suddenly so aptly named Memorial Hall, a tribute to the life and work of Bishop, an accomplished woman

whom Brown recalls as “ a much revered teacher at Harvard, modest, astute, and private; with many friends ... a fixture in the poetry community, as unassuming as others were flamboyant.”

I marvel now to think with whom I shared the space that evening; I realize now that every living poet I had ever heard of was probably in that room; every literary luminary who also admired Bishop. They invoked the message of the moment and of this morning, enacting the alchemy of absence: they turned loss into gain, and pain into opportunity. They honored the memory of Elizabeth Bishop by carrying on with the reading. They took turns sharing her words, as I would like to do here today. This is a poem Bishop wrote in 1976, published in her last collection, *Geography III*. It's a villanelle, a poem with nineteen lines divided into six stanzas, turning on two rhymes and built around two refrains; I urge you to listen for them.

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.

"One Art" is a kind of instruction manual on loss, writes the poet Edward Hirsch. What is the one art to which Bishop is referring? The art of losing? The art of writing? The art of mastering the art of losing? While it often seems impossible to live with loss, we couldn't live without it; to lose is human, to understand what to do with loss, divine. Bishop uses her art—the art of writing—to master loss; she is being ironic at the end, and those who encounter the poem for the first time often rail against what they misread as the speaker's dismissive stance. The irony is that the poem has been lost on them.

"The reader overhears what the poet is forcing herself to acknowledge," writes Hirsch. The famously reticent Bishop, he continues, intrudes uncharacteristically into her own poem. Were this poem a play, we would say that Bishop is breaking the Fourth Wall; we hear the voice of the poet, replacing the voice of the speaker, willing herself to admit just how disastrous the loss has been, in a parenthetical aside—"Write it!"—that has been called the most shocking parentheses in American poetry.

There is nothing that can prepare us for the loss of a loved one or the loss of love. As Bishop reminds us, we may own people and places only in our hearts and memories, claim rivers, realms, and continents only in the infinite space of our minds. So what should we do with loss? What presence does absence allow? What may loss afford us after all?

Bishop plays with the villanelle form, whose ritualistic repetition and constraint is such a perfect vehicle for conveying both the comfort and restraint of mourning rituals such as this morning's. She changes the line at the end very slightly in a way that is barely noticeable: the refrain "the art of losing isn't hard to master" becomes "the art of losing's not too hard to master." Has Bishop lost the battle with form? Or is she so in control of the form that she can break the rules? She asks the question we need to ask ourselves when we are overcome with loss and grief—will we take charge, limit its length, give it form?—or will we give in, and let it overwhelm us?

Bishop's taxonomy of loss moves from the mundane to the monumental, from the specific to the general and back again. Think for a moment of what you have lost—recently, in the last decade, or over a lifetime. I think of two bracelets my grandparents gave me that slipped off my wrist, on a beach, in a dressing room; a favorite flea market earring that fell into the gutter last year; an entire roll of stamps that disappeared from my pocket when I was a teenager. I think of my father, and his classmates from the Class of 1946 whose names are inscribed here on that memorial wall, of family and friendships, of offers and opportunities. Turn now, or later, in the miraculous privacy of your minds, to your own lists and litanies of loss; muster and master them with memory.

In the 25th reunion class we have lost seven women; and as I read their names, those of you who know them may think of them, and others may recall their own lost classmates and friends and family members. We remember:

Christina Elizabeth Barth

Carrie Sue Fordham

Leslie Smith Hahn

Constance Laibe Hays □

Leslie Gray Poole

Susan M. Scully □

and Lisa Thayer

There are two other recent losses in the Harvard and Radcliffe community I'd like to note among the many: Dean Jeremy Knowles, father of my classmate Sebastian and husband of Jane Knowles, who retired as archivist of Radcliffe College; and my friend Henry "Hank" Moses, who was dean of freshmen when I was here, husband of my friend Mary "Missy" Holland, Class of '73, and former President of the Radcliffe College Alumnae Association. We miss their joking voices, the gestures we loved, but oddly enough it is in fact the memory of exactly these things that will sustain us. How is it that what we miss most and what causes the most pain through their loss is also what best fills the void through our memory of them? That, to me, is the alchemy of absence.

And now to the last and vaster realm, the one in which we dwell today: the realm of Radcliffe.

As the tenth anniversary of the Radcliffe Institute approaches, with its roots in Radcliffe College and the Institute Polly Bunting so wisely created in 1960 (and where my mother worked in 1963), we honor the tradition of Radcliffe College and

its friends and graduates. Many of us feel its loss, even those of us who did not attend the college, per se; I remember, 29 years ago in Providence, Rhode Island, telling the late Mary Schaffner, Class of 1940 and my headmistress at the Lincoln School, that I had gotten into Harvard and she gently corrected me: “You have been accepted at Radcliffe, my dear.” But in fact, by 1979 there was joint admission and my 1983 degree reads Harvard-Radcliffe. We must feel, just as keenly as the loss, the gains that have been made since then: there are no more all-male dorms as there were when I was a freshman; there is now gender parity or even female skew in admissions; there is a female President and Vice President and University Marshal of Harvard University, the next President of the HAA will be a woman, and outside the Yard, if such a place exists, we have had a woman running for President of the United States.

I know the loss of the college was a loss for many; for some of you in this room, Radcliffe was your college, the way Harvard-Radcliffe was mine, the way Harvard is for more recent graduates. But you should know that many of us are carrying the torch for your alma mater. We have created a Radcliffe Shared Interest group for Alumnae and Friends of Radcliffe College within the Harvard Alumni Association. We want to keep connecting Radcliffe alumnae to each other, to undergraduates, to the Institute, and to the university. We look forward, while remembering to look back. We believe in the work of the Institute, and are proud to offer its riches to friends and alumnae everywhere. But what we don’t always remember, and what struck me like a thunderbolt when I was gathering my thoughts for today, was a line I’ve heard a thousand times that never resonated with me until now: Radcliffe College was founded to offer women access to a Harvard education, a goal it achieved well before my time. In other words—in Bishop’s words—Radcliffe was filled with the intent to be lost, so its loss was no disaster—although I admit that at times it has looked, to me, like disaster.

Sometimes, loss is more.

If you believe in the alchemy of absence, in the possibility of turning loss into opportunity, the art of losing *is* easier to master. It’s taken me 25 years to begin to understand this, to embrace the changes and losses at Radcliffe and in the rest of my life, and to acknowledge the progress that has inevitably accompanied them. I recall that in my Freshman Register someone wrote, “If I could find an inner peace and turn it outward, that would be the greatest thing.” The alchemy of absence has allowed me a glimpse of such a peace and I offer it to all of you this morning. Thank you.