**Readings for Literature and Theology III: Week 2**

***A Miracle for Breakfast* by Elizabeth Bishop**

At six o'clock we were waiting for coffee,  
waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb  
that was going to be served from a certain balcony  
—like kings of old, or like a miracle.  
It was still dark. One foot of the sun  
steadied itself on a long ripple in the river.  
  
The first ferry of the day had just crossed the river.  
It was so cold we hoped that the coffee  
would be very hot, seeing that the sun  
was not going to warm us; and that the crumb  
would be a loaf each, buttered, by a miracle.  
At seven a man stepped out on the balcony.  
  
He stood for a minute alone on the balcony  
looking over our heads toward the river.  
A servant handed him the makings of a miracle,  
consisting of one lone cup of coffee  
and one roll, which he proceeded to crumb,  
his head, so to speak, in the clouds—along with the sun.  
  
Was the man crazy? What under the sun  
was he trying to do, up there on his balcony!  
Each man received one rather hard crumb,  
which some flicked scornfully into the river,  
and, in a cup, one drop of the coffee.  
Some of us stood around, waiting for the miracle.  
  
I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.  
A beautiful villa stood in the sun  
and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.  
In front, a baroque white plaster balcony  
added by birds, who nest along the river,  
—I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—  
  
and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb  
my mansion, made for me by a miracle,  
through ages, by insects, birds, and the river  
working the stone. Every day, in the sun,  
at breakfast time I sit on my balcony  
with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.  
  
We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.  
A window across the river caught the sun  
as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.

***The End Of March* by Elizabeth Bishop**  
  
It was cold and windy, scarcely the day  
to take a walk on that long beach  
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,  
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,  
seabirds in ones or twos.  
The rackety, icy, offshore wind  
numbed our faces on one side;  
disrupted the formation  
of a lone flight of Canada geese;  
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers  
in upright, steely mist.  
  
The sky was darker than the water  
--it was the color of mutton-fat jade.  
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed  
a track of big dog-prints (so big  
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on  
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,  
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,  
over and over. Finally, they did end:  
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,  
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,  
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost...  
A kite string?--But no kite.  
  
I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,  
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box  
set up on pilings, shingled green,  
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener  
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),  
protected from spring tides by a palisade  
of--are they railroad ties?  
(Many things about this place are dubious.)  
I'd like to retire there and do nothing,  
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:  
look through binoculars, read boring books,  
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,  
talk to myself, and, foggy days,  
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.  
At night, a grog a l'américaine.  
I'd blaze it with a kitchen match  
and lovely diaphanous blue flame  
would waver, doubled in the window.  
There must be a stove; there is a chimney,  
askew, but braced with wires,  
and electricity, possibly  
--at least, at the back another wire  
limply leashes the whole affair  
to something off behind the dunes.  
A light to read by--perfect! But--impossible.  
And that day the wind was much too cold  
even to get that far,  
and of course the house was boarded up.  
  
On the way back our faces froze on the other side.  
The sun came out for just a minute.  
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,  
the drab, damp, scattered stones  
were multi-colored,  
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,  
individual shadows, then pulled them in again.  
They could have been teasing the lion sun,  
except that now he was behind them  
--a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,  
making those big, majestic paw-prints,  
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

***In the Waiting Room* by Elizabeth Bishop**

In Worcester, Massachusetts,  
I went with Aunt Consuelo  
to keep her dentist's appointment  
and sat and waited for her  
in the dentist's waiting room.  
It was winter. It got dark  
early. The waiting room  
was full of grown-up people,  
arctics and overcoats,  
lamps and magazines.  
My aunt was inside  
what seemed like a long time  
and while I waited I read  
the *National Geographic*  
(I could read) and carefully  
studied the photographs:  
the inside of a volcano,  
black, and full of ashes;  
then it was spilling over  
in rivulets of fire.  
Osa and Martin Johnson  
dressed in riding breeches,  
laced boots, and pith helmets.  
A dead man slung on a pole  
--"Long Pig," the caption said.  
Babies with pointed heads  
wound round and round with string;  
black, naked women with necks  
wound round and round with wire  
like the necks of light bulbs.  
Their breasts were horrifying.  
I read it right straight through.  
I was too shy to stop.  
And then I looked at the cover:  
the yellow margins, the date.  
Suddenly, from inside,  
came an *oh!* of pain  
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--  
not very loud or long.  
I wasn't at all surprised;  
even then I knew she was  
a foolish, timid woman.  
I might have been embarrassed,  
but wasn't. What took me  
completely by surprise  
was that it was *me*:  
my voice, in my mouth.  
Without thinking at all  
I was my foolish aunt,  
I--we--were falling, falling,  
our eyes glued to the cover  
of the *National Geographic*,  
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days  
and you'll be seven years old.  
I was saying it to stop  
the sensation of falling off  
the round, turning world.  
into cold, blue-black space.  
But I felt: you are an *I*,  
you are an *Elizabeth*,  
you are one of *them*.  
*Why* should you be one, too?  
I scarcely dared to look  
to see what it was I was.  
I gave a sidelong glance  
--I couldn't look any higher--  
at shadowy gray knees,  
trousers and skirts and boots  
and different pairs of hands  
lying under the lamps.  
I knew that nothing stranger  
had ever happened, that nothing  
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,  
or me, or anyone?  
What similarities--  
boots, hands, the family voice  
I felt in my throat, or even  
the *National Geographic*  
and those awful hanging breasts--  
held us all together  
or made us all just one?  
How--I didn't know any  
word for it--how "unlikely". . .  
How had I come to be here,  
like them, and overhear  
a cry of pain that could have  
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright  
and too hot. It was sliding  
beneath a big black wave,  
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.  
The War was on. Outside,  
in Worcester, Massachusetts,  
were night and slush and cold,  
and it was still the fifth  
of February, 1918.