

## James Longenbach: On "At the Fishhouses"

The final lines of Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" articulate the notion of historical understanding on which her poems, early and late, come to rest. Bishop speaks here of a sea so cold that, should you dip your hand in it, "Your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn."

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: dark, salt, dear, moving, utterly free, drawn from the cold hard mouth of the world, derived from the rocky breasts forever, flowing and drawn, and since our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

These lines offer a charged metaphor for the origins of knowledge, the rocky breasts, an image Bishop often associates with the Nova Scotia landscape where she lost her mother. At the same time, the lines caution that, like all metaphors, this one is made and therefore provisional--doubly so: "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be."

The realization that "knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown" raises not only questions of poetic structure but questions of value. In "At the Fishhouses," Bishop links the Nova Scotia landscape with the female body but reminds us at the same time that the equation is historically contingent.

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### **Author:**

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