

excerpt from

phases of the moon

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“She was the master of silence. And that is very important—this communication of not only the evident things, the said things, but the unsaid things. Because I think our lives are made not only of the things that we said, but the things that we don’t say, that we cannot say. And the job of the poet is to show it—to show the silence. And Elizabeth [Bishop] was a master of this difficult art.” – Octavio Paz

“Name it friendship if you want to—like names of cities printed on maps, the word is much too big, it spreads all over the place, and tells nothing of the actual *place* it means to name.” – Elizabeth Bishop

setting

Vassar College, 1933
which should feel eerily like now

characters

Bishie – the poet Elizabeth Bishop as a 21 year-old socialist vegetarian in a pea coat
Margaret – Bishie’s roommate, an aspiring artist, also a socialist in a pea coat
Louise – Bishie’s friend, a socialite in a fur coat

one: *full moon*

*Louise and Bishie outside a dorm
shouting up at a window on the second floor*

BISHIE

MARGARET MILLER

LOUISE

leave it, Bishie, she's not gonna

BISHIE

MAGGIE

the window opens

Margaret Miller (MM) sticks her head out

MM

WHAT?

BISHIE

come out with us

MM

what are you doing?

BISHIE

who cares

LOUISE

she's not gonna come

MM

who's that with you?

BISHIE

Louise

LOUISE

hey Maggie

MM

gimme one second

she leaves the window

BISHIE

I told you she's cool

LOUISE
she's not cool

BISHIE
she is, she's cool

LOUISE
we'll see

BISHIE
oh come on
she's like my best friend

LOUISE
then what the hell does that make me

BISHIE
don't

LOUISE
I'm just kidding
I don't do best friends
I have attachment issues

MM walks up to them

MM
are you guys drunk?

BISHIE
no

LOUISE
yes

MM

well?

are you sharing or what?

BISHIE
told you

Louise hands MM a flask
MM takes a sip, recoils

MM
what the hell is this

LOUISE
nice, right?

MM
it tastes like nail polish

BISHIE
feels good though

LOUISE
are we doing this?

MM
doing what

BISHIE
it's a full moon

MM
so...?

LOUISE
so we're embracing the celestial event, Margaret

BISHIE
we're going to the lake

MM
why

LOUISE
Dionysus

BISHIE
just come with us

MM

how much of this have you guys had?

BISHIE
not a lot

LOUISE
a lot

MM
okay, but no swimming

LOUISE
no promises

BISHIE
we're doing research for Classics
trying to recreate the cult of Dionysus

MM
what does that mean?

LOUISE
it means we're experimenting with revelry

BISHIE
enjoying earthly pleasures

LOUISE
like alcohol

BISHIE
and food—
hey Louise, we skipped food

LOUISE
revelry!

BISHIE
and theatre and song

LOUISE
and sex

MM
I never thought the art department would look so tame

LOUISE
we are worshipping
life itself

BISHIE
and death
we also worship death
because without death,
life is
absolutely
meaningless

MM
I need another drink

BISHIE
hand her the sacrament!

LOUISE
the Bishop has spoken!

Louise hands MM the flask

MM
are there bishops in the cult of Dionysus?

MM drinks, hands the flask back to Louise

LOUISE
are there Cardinals in spring?

Louise drinks, hands the flask to Bishie

BISHIE
“and whether pigs have wings!”

Bishie drinks

LOUISE
behold:

the ancient stone tablet

MM
it's a rock

BISHIE

Maggie, we are ancient Greek cultists tonight
so we gaze not upon Poughkeepsie
but upon the Pyrenees

LOUISE

the Pyrenees aren't in Greece

BISHIE

oh what do I know
I've never been anywhere

I like maps for the drama

MM

I like them for the color

LOUISE

so we gaze upon the Aegean Sea

MM

you guys are being ridiculous

BISHIE *to MM*

we're in a different world tonight
where we're not ourselves

for one night only
everything is reversed, okay?

MM

fine

LOUISE

look, the moon is in the lake

BISHIE

see?
it's already working
up is down and down is up

LOUISE

I think we need another drink before we begin

MM

begin what

BISHIE
the ritual

MM
you're kind of freaking me out

LOUISE
drink

they all drink
Louise looks at Bishie
Bishie claps her hands together

BISHIE
Louise,
have you secured the sacrifice?

Louise grabs MM from behind,
pinning her arms in

LOUISE
I have

MM squirms and kicks at Louise

MM
stop it!

both Louise and Bishie laugh

BISHIE
she's kidding
let her go, Louise

Louise releases MM

MM
that wasn't funny

LOUISE
the sacrifice is secured

Louise produces a snail
from her pocket

MM
you're not really going to kill that, are you?

BISHIE
it's just a snail, Maggie
we have to sacrifice something

MM
you can't just kill it!

LOUISE
god vegetarians are wild
I'm wearing like ten times as much carnage right now—
you two must think I'm a monster

BISHIE
no

MM
yes

BISHIE
look at the moon in the lake, Maggie

MM
okay

BISHIE
hand me the sacrifice!

Louise hands Bishie the sacrifice

BISHIE
who is our god

LOUISE
Dionysus!!

BISHIE
who is our god

LOUISE
Dionysus!!!!

BISHIE *to MM*
who is our god

MM
Dionysus

BISHIE *to MM*
sing for Dionysus

MM
???

LOUISE *repeating, like a sung chant:*
mmm Dionysus mmm

BISHIE *to MM*
sing

MM *harmonizing with Louise:*
mmm Dionysus mmm

BISHIE *like a sung litany over their chanting:*
oh Dionysus
we have come to drink your holy wine
we have come to make ourselves divine
we have come to give our bodies to the earth
we have come to ask for your return
take us now as we begin
to let the beast rise within

*Bishie smashes the snail with a rock
she licks the rock and hands it to Louise
Louise licks the rock and hands it to MM
she looks at them both and then licks it*

*Bishie grabs Louise and MM's hands,
they begin to turn in a circle counterclockwise
then clockwise, still chanting
eventually they mess it up, collapse
all on top of each other in a pile
from the ground they look up at the false moon
Louise lets out a howl
Bishie and MM join in
they laugh
and then they begin to kiss each other
it's intense and Dionysian*

it's the beginning of the end

two:

the next morning in Bishie and MM's shared dorm room
MM is still in her twin bed, dead to the world
Bishie is up and oddly energetic, pacing around

BISHIE
that was fun, right?

MM
mmmm

BISHIE
last night?

MM
let's talk about it in the morning

BISHIE
it's already noon

MM
what?
no !!!
what time is it?
I have so much to do

BISHIE
I made you coffee

MM
how is it noon
I just went to sleep

BISHIE
drink this

Bishie hands MM coffee

MM
mm
I love you

BISHIE
you love coffee

MM

I feel like I'm dying
my eye is too big?
is my eye big?

BISHIE

no, your eyes look normal

MM

it's like pushing out of my socket?

BISHIE

just drink the coffee

MM

what happened last night

BISHIE

it was kind of surreal, right?

MM

what was?

BISHIE

all of it!
the ceremony

I felt like we actually *did* something
I don't know what
I felt...

MM

what happened?

BISHIE

what do you mean?

MM

you guys came to my window

BISHIE

we came and got you, yeah

MM

and then what?

BISHIE

you don't remember?

MM

I remember a dog?

BISHIE

no, there was no dog

MM

a wolf maybe?

BISHIE

that was us

MM

we were wolves?

BISHIE

no,

well, I mean,

kind of ?

I guess ?

MM

what the hell were we drinking?

BISHIE

absinthe

MM

isn't that illegal?

BISHIE

I mean

everything was illegal like a year ago

and that didn't stop us

MM

where did you even get it?

BISHIE

Louise probably got it in Europe

MM

she's been to Europe?

BISHIE
she's been everywhere

MM
I feel like I might be dying—
am I dying?

BISHIE
you're not dying,
I promise, okay?

MM
my mom would kill me
if I died

BISHIE
that would be difficult—
you'd have to die twice

MM
I would

BISHIE
you're not dying

MM
why are you so chipper

BISHIE
I'm not chipper

MM
I'm dying and you're like
glowing

BISHIE
I'm just more of a drinker than you are
I've built up a tolerance

MM
you have a tolerance for poison?

BISHIE
guess so

MM
I hate this
I will never do this again

BISHIE
but we had fun, right?

MM
did we?

BISHIE
I did

MM
I seriously can't remember
anything

what happened?

BISHIE
um

it felt really cool last night
and now it sort of
feels dumb
in the daylight

MM
but you were with me the whole time, right?
nothing happened to me?

BISHIE
I was right there with you the whole time

MM
thank god
you hear those horrible stories
of people taking advantage

BISHIE
right, no
you were safe with me

MM
thank god

BISHIE
maybe it will come back to you

MM
yeah, maybe

three:

Bishie and Louise smoking outside

BISHIE
I'm telling you
she doesn't remember anything

LOUISE
bullshit
I'm so sick of Vassar girls

BISHIE
you are a Vassar girl

LOUISE
I think they should all be checked out
for mass amnesia

BISHIE
no, seriously
Maggie doesn't drink at all

we shouldn't have brought her

LOUISE
I didn't want to bring her!
you were all:
Margaret Miller is my best friend
I love Margaret Miller

BISHIE
shut up

LOUISE
Maggie, Maggie

BISHIE
I was not!