

The Bight

(On my birthday)

At low tide like this how sheer the water is.
 White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
 and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.
 Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
 the water in the bight doesn't wet anything, [5]
 the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.
 One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire
 one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.
 The little ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock
 already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves. [10]
 The birds are outsize. Pelicans crash
 into this peculiar gas unnecessarily hard,
 it seems to me, like pickaxes,
 rarely coming up with anything to show for it,
 and going off with humorous elbowings. [15]
 Black-and-white man-of-war birds soar
 on impalpable drafts
 and open their tails like scissors on the curves
 or tense them like wishbones, till they tremble.
 The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in [20]
 with the obliging air of retrievers,
 bristling with jackstraw gaffs and hooks
 and decorated with bobbles of sponges.
 There is a fence of chicken wire along the dock
 where, glinting like little plowshares, [25]
 the blue-gray shark tails are hung up to dry
 for the Chinese-restaurant trade.
 Some of the little white boats are still piled up
 against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,
 and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm, [30]
 like torn-open, unanswered letters.
 The bight is littered with old correspondences.
 Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
 and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
 All the untidy activity continues, [35]
 awful but cheerful.

Bight: a large, curved and shallow bay

[1] **sheer:** thin, translucent

[2] **marl:** an earthy deposit that is rich in either lime or calcium

[3] **pilings:** structures made from heavy beams called piles that are used to support docks and piers.

[7] **Baudelaire:** Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), a French poet

[8] **marimba:** a xylophone-like musical instrument

[9] **ocher:** golden yellow or yellowish brown

[9] **dredge:** a machine used for dredging up or removing earth from the seabed

[10] **claves:** a jazzy rhythmic pattern used in Cuban music

[16] **man-of-war birds:** seabirds, similar to pelicans, that have long wings and tail

[17] **impalpable:** intangible; incapable of being touched

[20] **frowsy:** untidy or dishevelled

[22] **jackstraw gaffs and hooks:** sticks with hooks; barbed spears

[25] **plowshares:** the cutting blade of a plough

Get In Gear

Think of a bay or a coastal area that you are familiar with. Write a paragraph about this area describing its features and landmarks.

Tease It Out

Lines 1 to 10

1. What is a 'bight'?
2. Class Discussion: Describe the scene that the poet presents in the poem. What objects does she see?
3. It is 'low tide'. How does the water in the bight appear? How does the poet describe the water's colour?
4. What objects or features of the seascape are visible above the water's surface?
5. The water does not seem to be behaving as water ought to behave. How is this evident in the first eight lines? How does the poet describe the water's behaviour in these lines?
6. What does the poet observe at the 'end of the dock'? How does she describe the sounds that this machine is making?

Lines 11 to 27

7. Why do you think the poet describes the birds as 'outrage'?
8. How does the poet describe the way the pelicans enter the water? What does she compare them to?
9. What two similes does the poet use to describe the way the tails of the man-of-war birds operate in flight? How does she describe the 'drafts' of wind that these birds 'soar' upon?
10. The poet describes the sponge boats that are entering the harbour or bight. How does she describe their appearance? What animal does she liken the boats to?
11. What objects are 'hung up to dry' upon the 'chicken wire along the dock'? How does the poet describe the appearance of these? What are they to be used for?

Lines 28 to 36

12. The poet describes some of the 'little white boats' upon the shore. What condition are these boats in? How did they end up like this?
13. What does the poet compare the damaged boats to? Why do you think she makes this comparison?
14. Class Discussion: The poet says that the 'bight is littered with old correspondences'. Consider the word 'correspondence'. What different meanings can this word have? How do you think the poet intends the word to be understood here? Are there a number of different relevant meanings?

15. The final image in the poem is that of the 'little ocher dredge' at work. How does the poet describe its appearance and the sounds it makes?
16. In the closing lines the poet sums up the activity in the bight. What adjectives does she use? Why do you think she uses each of these?

Think About Themes

1. How would you describe the atmosphere in the bight?
2. The poet says in parentheses under the title that she came across this bight on 'her birthday'. Does this fact have any bearing upon how you read and understand the poem? Do you think that the poet's perception of the bight is influenced by it being her birthday?
3. 'The bight seems a very normal place, yet it is also somewhat strange, with some things not operating or behaving as you might expect'. Write a paragraph in response to this statement.
4. Discuss the way in which Bishop compares the birds and fish to mechanical objects, and the machines and boats to animals. Why do you think she makes these comparisons?
5. What images from the poem did you find most effective and memorable?
6. In the last line of the poem, Bishop describes the activity of the bight as 'awful but cheerful'. Discuss the poem in light of this description, commenting on what you consider to be the 'awful' and the 'cheerful' aspects of the bight.

In Context

1. Write an essay about the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop – referring to 'The Bight' and two other poems – in which you discuss how the poet deals with place.
2. Bishop's attention to detail is remarkable and her similes often vivid. Referring to three of her poems, write an essay in which you discuss the poet's use of simile.



Gerard Manley Hopkins

Hopkins was born in Stratford, Essex, on 28 July 1844, to a wealthy and cultured family. His father was a businessman and diplomat who dabbled in literature, writing books and articles on a variety of subjects, including several books of poetry. His mother, Catherine, was the daughter of a physician and was noted for her love of philosophy and literature. Hopkins, it seems, had a relatively happy childhood. His education began at home and was influenced by his father's literary interests.

He attended the prestigious Highgate School, where he received a classical Victorian education, focusing on subjects such as history, Greek and Latin. He was a reasonably sociable and outgoing boy, one who by all accounts got on quite well with his fellow schoolmates. Though Hopkins was slight and physically unimposing, he was surprisingly tough and athletic, managing to hold his own on the vicious playing pitches of a Victorian public school.

However, there were signs that he was not an average schoolboy. Even at Highgate he began to exhibit a strong inclination toward an ascetic or self-punishing lifestyle – a quality that in later life would lead him to pursue a vocation as a Jesuit priest. On one occasion, he theorised that people consumed more liquids than they needed and, to prove himself right, abstained from drinking water and other liquids for three days before he began to suffer from dehydration. He also exhibited a stubborn nature that often caused him to run afoul of the school authorities, and he was once whipped and threatened with expulsion. However, it was also at Highgate that Hopkins' poetic instincts began to stir, and he won a prize for writing a long poem.

After school, Hopkins went to Oxford University, where he continued to write poetry. Though he could be stubborn, touchy and arrogant, he was popular with his fellow students and enjoyed the university's social life, especially boating with friends on the River Cherwell. At the time, Oxford was buzzing with theological debate. Many young students of an artistic bent, including Hopkins, were unhappy with their own Protestant religion. They were also unwilling to contemplate the possibility of atheism.

Beguiled by what they regarded as the drama and mystery of Mass and confession, many of these Protestant men found themselves drawn to the Catholic religion. They regarded Catholic rituals as a kind of theatre, and its rich symbolism appealed to their artistic nature. Their interest in Catholicism was a form of rebellion, since at the time the Roman Catholic Church was held in deep suspicion by the majority of English people. Protestants who adopted the ceremonies and rituals of the Catholic Church while retaining their Protestant beliefs were known as 'Anglo-Catholics'.

Throughout his time at Oxford, Hopkins – like many young students – was an Anglo-Catholic. More and more, however, he drifted toward Catholicism proper. He adopted Catholic customs, such as going to confession

“In later years, however, relations with his family became strained following his conversion to Catholicism (both his parents were devout Anglicans).”

and not eating meat on Fridays. He would even chastise himself with a whip during Lent. Hopkins, it seems, was attracted to Catholicism not only because of its symbolism and mystery but also because of its rigour and severity. He eventually took the leap and converted to the faith in 1866, at the age of twenty-two.

Much has been made of Hopkins' sexuality. At Oxford he opted for a celibate life, which has prompted many critics to suggest that Hopkins was deeply uncomfortable with his sexual orientation. There is evidence to suggest he was attracted to a young poet called Digby Dolben, who drowned in 1865, shortly before Hopkins' conversion. Several critics maintain that it was Hopkins' discomfort with his own sexuality that led to his decision to join the priesthood. It also, perhaps, gave rise to the feelings of self-loathing expressed in poems such as 'No worst, there is none' and his notorious tendency toward self-punishment. Throughout his life Hopkins was to dwell on his own faults with an almost painful attention to detail. He would be overcome with remorse for even the tiniest failing or transgression.

Having graduated from Oxford, Hopkins taught for nine months at the Oratory school founded by John Henry Newman, one of England's leading Catholics. While there he decided to become a priest. His decision to join the Jesuit order – known as the 'spiritual army' of the Church – shows his desire for rigorous order and soldierly discipline. Life as a Jesuit was incredibly demanding and austere – an endless succession of fasting, praying and penance. Throughout this time Hopkins studied at Manresa House, which is the Jesuit school in London, and also at Stonyhurst, near Blackburn in Lancashire.

Hopkins' health was consistently poor, however, and the order sent him to St Bueno's in Wales to recuperate. The period in Wales was one of the happiest in Hopkins' life. He fell in love with the Welsh countryside, and – prompted by the rector at St Bueno's – began writing poetry again. Many of Hopkins' best-known poems date from this period, including 'Spring', 'The Windhover' and 'God's Grandeur'.

From 1877 onwards Hopkins spent much of his time in the bleak slums of industrialised northern Britain. He spent several periods at Stonyhurst, a few months in Glasgow and a particularly dismal time in Liverpool. The bleakness of urban industrialised life did not agree with Hopkins and he struggled to find inspiration for his poetry ('Felix Randal' – written during his Liverpool period – was inspired by the death of one of his parishioners).

In 1884 the Jesuits moved Hopkins to Dublin to teach at the newly formed Catholic university. This was a particularly unhappy period in Hopkins' life. He felt out of place in Ireland, deeply missing the friends and acquaintances he had left behind in Britain. To him the Irish seemed an alien and incomprehensible race and he found it difficult to relate to his students, colleagues and indeed to Dublin life in general. His Irish co-workers, for their part, didn't know what to make of this intense and eccentric Englishman had been thrust into their midst. He despised the grimy slums that had overtaken the once grand city, and to make matters worse, he was massively overworked at the university.

Under these conditions Hopkins' physical health, always fragile, became very poor. His mental well-being also deteriorated and he was overcome by feelings of depression, frustration and religious doubt. Hopkins' 'terrible sonnets' – including 'No worst, there is none' and 'I wake and feel the fell of dark' – stem from this bleak period. As one critic put it, he was a 'sensitive, over-scrupulous and unusual man who had been formed with too little capacity for human happiness'. Hopkins spent five years in Dublin, until his poor health, exacerbated by the filth and squalor of the city, finally got the better of him. He died, harassed and exhausted, from typhoid fever in 1889. His last words were 'I am so happy, I am so happy'.

From a Survivor

The pact that we made was the ordinary pact
of men & women in those days

I don't know who we thought we were
that our personalities
could resist the failures of the race

[5]

Lucky or unlucky, we didn't know
the race had failures of that order
and that we were going to share them

Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special

Your body is as vivid to me
as it ever was: even more

[10]

since my feeling for it is clearer:
I know what it could and could not do

it is no longer
the body of a god
or anything with power over my life

[15]

Next year it would have been 20 years
and you are wastefully dead
who might have made the leap
we talked, too late, of making

[20]

which I live now
not as a leap
but a succession of brief, amazing movements

each one making possible the next

[1] **pact:** treaty, agreement

Tease It Out

1. Who is the speaker addressing in the opening lines?
2. What is the 'ordinary pact' to which the speaker refers?
3. From your reading of lines 1 to 2, what do you think is the speaker's attitude to marriage? What does the phrase 'in those days' tell you about how the speaker's attitudes might have changed since she got married?
4. 'I don't know who we thought we were'. How does the poet characterise the younger versions of her husband and herself? Come up with three or four adjectives that might describe them.
5. What do you understand by the term 'the failures of the race'? Does it suggest that there are universal failures when it comes to marriage? What might these be?
6. Did the younger versions of the speaker and her husband know about these 'failures' when they were preparing to marry? Explain your answer.
7. Line 9: How would you describe the tone of this line? Do you think the poet blames her younger self for thinking of herself as 'special' or is her attitude more forgiving? Is there a certain irony in the idea of 'everybody' thinking of themselves as 'special'?
8. 'Your body is as vivid to me/ as it ever was'. In what context do you imagine the poet is thinking of her husband's body here? Consider the following possibilities and rank them in order of likelihood, giving reasons for your decisions:
 - They are in bed together.
 - She is looking at him from across the room.
 - She is remembering his body from the early days of their marriage.
 - She is paying her respects to his body at his funeral.
9. What do you think the speaker means when she says that her 'feeling' for her husband's body is 'clearer' than before? How might your feelings for a partner's body be unclear?
10. 'I know what it could and could not do'. What does this line suggest about the intimacy of marriage – even one that is not particularly happy?
11. Lines 14 to 16: What does this stanza suggest about the marriage? Do you think it was an equal or unequal partnership? Explain your answer.
12. What milestone would have occurred 'Next year'?
13. What does the phrase 'wastefully dead' suggest about the manner of her husband's death?
14. What do you understand by the phrase 'to take a leap'? What 'leap' do you think the speaker and her husband were discussing before his death?
15. The speaker says that she is now attempting to achieve this 'leap' but in 'brief, amazing movements' rather than in one big gesture. What does this suggest about the nature of grieving?
16. Why do you think the poet refers to these movements as 'amazing'? What meaning of 'amazing' do you think she means here?

Think About Themes

1. 'Your body ... is no longer/ the body of a god'. What does the poem have to say about the power dynamic that exists in longterm relationships? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
2. When someone dies, we often hear the phrase 'He is survived by his wife'. The title of this poem, 'From a Survivor', alludes to this terminology. However, do you think there is another sense in which the poet considers herself to be a survivor? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
3. 'Though the marriage wasn't perfect, there are moments of real affection for her late husband throughout this poem.' Write a few paragraphs in response to this statement, referring to the poem to support your answer.

In Context

1. 'Throughout her work, Rich presents marriage as a practical social contract rather than a romantic relationship.' Discuss this statement with reference to 'From a Survivor' and at least one other poem on your course.
2. Do you think that the tone of the poem is ultimately a hopeful one? Support your answer with reference to the poem.
3. 'Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special.' Write a short story of a few hundred words, using this as your first line.