

Loss in One Art and A Temporary Matter

Posted on September 28, 2018

Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art" and Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "A Temporary Matter" both examine loss, but they resist the idea that grief can be mastered through a simple lesson. Bishop's speaker repeatedly claims that losing is not difficult while the poem's form and final hesitation reveal the opposite. Lahiri portrays Shoba and Shukumar after the stillbirth of their child, showing how grief alters work, domestic routines, intimacy, and communication. The original essay correctly connects loss with detachment and emotional disruption, yet it concludes too quickly that acceptance produces a stress-free life. Both works show that acceptance can coexist with pain and that language may disclose loss without resolving it (Bishop; Lahiri; Ramazani).

Loss as Daily Practice

"One Art" begins with ordinary objects and small failures of attention. Keys, time, places, and names appear as losses that can supposedly train the speaker for greater ones. This progression gives the poem the structure of an exercise. The speaker turns grief into a discipline because routine seems more controllable than sudden emotional injury. Yet the examples are not interchangeable. Misplacing keys differs ethically and psychologically from losing a relationship or homeland. The poem's list exposes the wish to convert qualitative differences into manageable quantity. Readers hear confidence in the repeated statement while noticing that the need for repetition signals insecurity (Bishop; Ramazani).

The Villanelle and Compulsion

The villanelle requires recurring lines and a strict pattern of rhyme. Bishop uses that structure to dramatize attempted control. The refrain returns as though repetition could stabilize experience, but each return changes because the losses become more intimate. Form functions both as discipline and symptom: the speaker organizes grief while circling it compulsively. The final parenthetical command to "Write it!" suggests that even the word "disaster" must be forced onto the page. Mastery is therefore partial. The poem achieves artistic control over language without proving emotional indifference. Its art lies in making the breakdown of certainty audible inside an apparently controlled form (Bishop; Ramazani).

From Objects to Places

The poem's movement from keys and wasted time toward houses, cities, rivers, and a continent expands the scale of loss. These places may represent travel, migration, memory, or the speaker's biography, but the poem avoids detailed explanation. That restraint allows the losses to feel both personal and public. A home is not merely property; it contains routine, identity, and relationships. A city or continent exceeds individual possession, making the language of "losing" deliberately unstable. The speaker claims ownership and relinquishment while recognizing that places can become inaccessible through distance, time, or political history. Loss is spatial as well as emotional: people may remain alive while the world shared with them disappears (Bishop; Ramazani).

The Final Beloved

The final stanza reveals that the exercise has been moving toward the loss of a beloved "you." The speaker notices gesture and voice, details that make the person irreducible to the earlier list. She continues to insist that loss is not difficult to master, but the syntax hesitates and the poem acknowledges disaster. This admission does not cancel the preceding discipline. It shows why the discipline was needed. The beloved exposes the limit of analogy because no number of lost objects prepares a person fully for the disappearance of a relationship. Bishop's poem therefore does not teach emotional immunity. It stages the courage and self-deception involved in speaking at all (Bishop; Ramazani).

The Loss at the Center of A Temporary Matter

Lahiri's story begins after Shoba and Shukumar have lost their first child in a stillbirth. The event is not described simply as background; it reorganizes the household. Shukumar withdraws into the home and neglects his dissertation and self-care, while Shoba spends longer hours away and abandons routines she once managed carefully. Their different grief responses create mutual misinterpretation. Each sees the other's changed behavior but cannot translate it into a shared language. The marriage becomes a space where both people are present physically yet emotionally separated. Loss operates through absence and through the altered presence of the survivors. Their shared home records this change before either spouse can explain it (Lahiri; Clewell).

Domestic Space and Neglected Routine

The original essay correctly notices cooking, housekeeping, dental appointments, and work. These apparently small details are crucial because grief often appears through disrupted routine rather than dramatic declaration. Shoba once planned meals and stored supplies; after the stillbirth, the kitchen no longer represents competence and anticipation. Shukumar's failure to brush his teeth or leave the

house shows depression-like impairment without requiring readers to diagnose him. The home becomes both shelter and trap. Objects retain evidence of an earlier marriage, making ordinary rooms emotionally charged. Lahiri demonstrates that bereavement changes time: tasks once performed automatically become reminders of a future that did not occur (Lahiri; Clewell).

The Power Outage as Temporary Structure

A notice that electricity will be cut for one hour each evening creates the story's central situation. Darkness suspends normal routines and gives the couple a rule: each person will reveal something previously hidden. The outages are temporary, but they create a form of intimacy absent in daylight. Like Bishop's villanelle, the game imposes structure on emotions that otherwise feel unmanageable. Candles and shared meals recall earlier closeness, yet the ritual also permits escalating confession. The darkness does not restore innocence. It provides controlled conditions under which truth can emerge. The title's "temporary matter" therefore refers to more than electricity; it describes the fragile interval in which reconnection appears possible (Lahiri).

Confession and Emotional Risk

The disclosures begin with relatively minor secrets and become more consequential. Each confession tests whether the marriage can tolerate knowledge that was withheld. The game produces pleasure because attention returns, but it also reveals how much separate life has accumulated. Shoba eventually announces that she has found an apartment and plans to leave. Her disclosure changes the meaning of the preceding evenings: what Shukumar experienced as renewal may have helped her prepare a departure. Communication is necessary, yet truth does not guarantee reconciliation. Lahiri avoids the therapeutic cliché that disclosure automatically heals. Words can connect people and also clarify that a relationship has already changed beyond recovery (Lahiri; Clewell).

Shukumar's Final Revelation

After Shoba announces her departure, Shukumar tells her that he held their dead child and knows the baby's sex and appearance. He had withheld this information because Shoba believed she did not want to know. The revelation can be read as intimacy, retaliation, or both. It gives the child specificity but also forces Shoba to encounter knowledge at the moment of separation. The ethics are deliberately uncomfortable. Grief does not make either spouse purely victim or healer; it can produce choices that wound. The final shared crying confirms connection without promising reunion. They mourn the child, the marriage, and the secrets that had separated them (Lahiri; Clewell).

Different Strategies of Control

Bishop's speaker controls loss through repetition, classification, and poetic form. Shoba controls disorder through work, planning, and eventually a decision to move. Shukumar controls pain through withdrawal and delayed disclosure. Each strategy offers temporary protection but also creates distance. The comparison shows that "mastery" can mean different things: enduring emotion, organizing it, refusing it, or making a decision despite it. Neither text endorses complete detachment. Instead, both reveal that control is negotiated and unstable. People may appear composed because they have found a structure, while the structure itself contains evidence of unresolved grief. Their efforts show that discipline can protect a person without fully healing the wound (Bishop; Lahiri; Ramazani).

Language and the Limits of Consolation

Both works use language to approach experiences that resist explanation. Bishop's refrain is persuasive and unpersuasive at once, while Lahiri's confessions create intimacy and damage. Language cannot return the lost person, child, place, or relationship. It can name details, expose silence, and make grief shareable. The limits of consolation are important because readers often expect literature to offer a solution. These texts provide recognition instead. They show that grief can include anger, avoidance, humor, routine, tenderness, and cruelty. A truthful account does not require a final state of being "free of stress." It requires admitting that survival and pain can occupy the same life (Ramazani; Clewell).

Acceptance without Erasure

Acceptance is sometimes misunderstood as approval, forgetting, or the end of sadness. In these works, a more accurate meaning is recognition that the lost reality cannot be restored through denial. Bishop's speaker reaches the word "disaster" while still writing. Shoba and Shukumar acknowledge truths that make their former marriage impossible, yet they cry together. Acceptance may allow action, but it does not erase attachment. Grief researchers similarly distinguish adaptation from detachment: people can maintain continuing bonds with what was lost while rebuilding daily life. The texts resist ranking one response as universally correct because personal history and relationship shape what adaptation can mean (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman; Clewell).

Conclusion

"One Art" and "A Temporary Matter" portray loss as an experience people try to organize through form, routine, silence, and disclosure. Bishop's villanelle turns mastery into a repeated claim whose instability becomes visible as the poem approaches the beloved. Lahiri's story shows grief entering

the kitchen, workplace, body, and marriage until a temporary power outage creates space for confessions that cannot restore the past. Both works challenge the idea that repeated small losses make major grief easy. Artistic and emotional structures help people endure, but they do not convert love into indifference. The achievement of each text is not a cure for grief; it is an honest representation of how control and collapse coexist (Bishop; Lahiri; Ramazani; Clewell; Klass, Silverman, and Nickman).

Works Cited

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