In the Fall we are broken, but with Love we find the promise of healing. This is the message of the gospels, but many of us have experienced this quite outside of any religious context; we simply come into the presence of love bareheaded with all our wounds apparent. When I fell in love with my husband, I had at the time no religious affiliation, and yet what I profoundly felt was that we were one soul that God had cut apart, a little off center perhaps, creating a bigger and a smaller half. Now, it seemed, we would reunite the parts and all my scars would disappear.

It is not, I think, an uncommon experience to be drawn by the experience of love into the realm of God. I like the way Jeanette Winterson captures this equivocal motion of the heart in her novel *The Passion*. Her protagonist, aptly named “Villanelle,” is an artist, a Venetian casino dealer with webbed feet, a pickpocket whose gender is a performance in defiance of her sex and whose down-to-earth perspective prior to falling in love gives her a foolish sense of invulnerability: “I am pragmatic about love and have taken my pleasure with both men and women, but I have never needed a guard for my heart. My heart is a reliable organ” (33). Love, that is “passion,” finds her out, however, destroying her naïve complacency. “How is it,” she asks, “that one day life is orderly and you are content, a little cynical perhaps but on the whole just so, and then without warning you find the solid floor is a trapdoor and you are now in another place whose geography is uncertain and whose customs are strange?” (49).

Villanelle is not a believer, at least not in a churchgoing sense, but in the aftermath of falling in love she is drawn to the churches of Venice, making the connection explicit between different kinds of love and longing.
I never go to confession; God doesn’t want us to confess, he wants us to challenge him, but for a while I went into our churches because they were built from the heart. Improbable hearts that I had never understood before. Hearts so full of longing that these old stones still cry out with the ecstasy. These are warm churches, built in the sun.

I sat at the back, listening to the music or mumbling through the service. I’m never tempted by God but I like his trappings. Not tempted but I begin to understand why others are. With this feeling inside, with this wild love that threatens, what safe places might there be? Where do you store gunpowder? How do you sleep at night again? If I were a little different I might turn passion into something holy and then I would sleep again. And then my ecstasy would be my ecstasy but I would not be afraid. (39–40)

This character is a Romantic, of course, and thus unlike what we mostly understand about Elizabeth Bishop. And yet Villanelle’s language of travel is highly reminiscent of Bishop’s psychological geography. Winterson’s character is not literally a traveler. She says: “Travellers at least have a choice. Those who set sail know that things will not be the same as at home. Explorers are prepared. But for us, who travel along the blood vessels, who come to the cities of the interior by chance, there is no preparation. We who were fluent find life is a foreign language. Somewhere between the swamp and the mountains. Somewhere between fear and sex. Somewhere between God and the Devil, passion is and the way there is sudden and the way back is worse” (49–50).

Bishop, too, was a passionate person, a “traveler” interested in the ambiguous motions of the heart. “We leave Santos [the harbor] at once”; she writes in Questions of Travel, “we are driving to the interior” (CP, 90). There is no safe harbor in Bishop any more than there is in Winterson. Both live on their nerves, but it is sometimes possible to read Bishop’s poems of longing not only as records of failed love affairs but also as religious poems. Villanelle speaks of passion as making it impossible to sleep; in Bishop’s “Insomnia” we find her longing for a world of “otherness” in which the realm of everyday reality might be inverted and Love become a presence rather than an absence.

The moon presides over this world of illusion, but the moon might be understood here as an imagined version of lesbian transcendence. In any case, she’s a figure to be reckoned with who illuminates a world of difference.

By the Universe deserted,

she’d tell it to go to hell,

and she’d find a body of water,