Gertrude Bishop’s Diary: Nova Scotia Hospital, 1916

Gertrude Bishop was institutionalized at the Nova Scotia Hospital for a nervous breakdown in June of 1916. She remained there until her death in 1934.

Elizabeth’s scream hung like a coat from the hook of her mouth. Her teeth

browned by tea. The tea. I stare into it—the saucer, the table, the women in white.

I drop a cube of sugar into the cup and wait. I am dissolving. My fingers

cut into skin. I have no knife, no calendar. Where is Elizabeth, the raspberry vinegar,

William’s kisses, his hand? My hands? The purple skirt, the mirror on the bureau,

the white teacup: this is what I remember. And the scream. The echo of the scream.

Elizabeth. William’s face stuck in the portrait above the fire. Mother’s hair struck

like a piano. The piano watching the room like an eye. The clock ticking. The hands.
My scream hanging in the hot air,  
the elm trees choking the window. I am alone

    in a bed topped with a blue pad.  
    I have no trunk, no box. I am the box.

I am becoming the women robed in white,  
clouds waiting to be filled with rain.

    Mother sends me packages addressed  
    in purple cursive, Elizabeth’s arm

draped around the package, the post office,  
her thin arm going all the way home.

    No matter which way I turn in bed  
    I face a wall. I am dissolving, I am dissolved.