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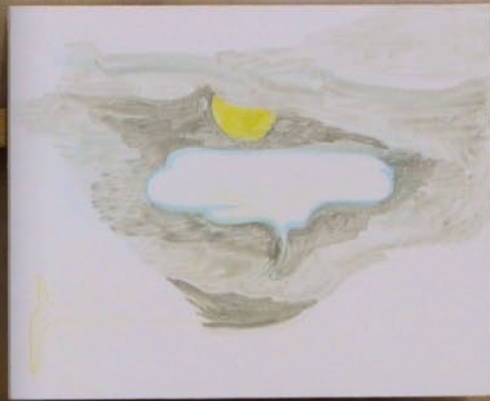


DEPENDENT RATIONAL ANIMALS

Roxy Walsh, Sally Underwood



Francisco de Zurbarán
*The Virgin Mary of Las
Cuevas, 1655*



INTRODUCTION

*"It is most often to others that we owe our survival, let alone our flourishing..." –Alistair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals**

Sally Underwood and Roxy Walsh met at Braziers International Artists' Workshop in 2006. Although their practices are distinctly different, Sally a sculptor and Roxy a painter, through dialogue they built an empathetic way of responding to each other's work. Their collaborative working has developed through a series of responses to each other's creative processes.

Walsh has always been interested in the way we encounter painting in the gallery environment and how changes in scale incite different ways of looking. She began to think about intimate spaces in which to view paintings, like caves or shelters, and was drawn to a painting by Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Virgin Mary of Las Cuevas* (1655), where the cape of the virgin acts as a shelter for many monks.

In 2010, Underwood moved to Berlin and built a nine sided dome or igloo in her studio where she slept. She placed one of Walsh's paintings inside and as they continued to discuss how sculpture might make a home for painting and how painting can hold the interior of a sculpture, Walsh sent two small paintings to Berlin to join the first work.

As the collaboration has continued a high level of trust and a sympathetic way of working has developed that complements and extends each artist's practice. The works in the exhibition depend on each other: Walsh's paintings are displayed inside Underwood's constructions. Through their presence, they alter the experience of the sculptures, encouraging the viewer to pause, invisible to visitors elsewhere in the gallery, in the stillness of time.

I would like to thank Sally and Roxy for their inspired creative approach to this exhibition and their experimental response to the architecture of the gallery space. I would also like to thank Catherine Hemelryk at Northampton Arts, and Rashida Davison at Globe Gallery in Newcastle for their part in the development

SANNA MOORE



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SYMPATHY

Dublin – 1997

Constance sat with the other women who were lined up along the corridor wall. Everyone had an appointment for eight thirty but most arrived earlier than that because they knew something she did not about outpatients. So at ten o'clock there were still seven women ahead of her, down from twenty when she'd first joined the queue. This was the price she paid for a healthy life, Constance thought – she was lucky. And it would be foolish to complain that nothing, in fact, happened until after nine. The woman after her had come in from Monasterevin and the traffic was beyond belief. Gridlock, she said.

Their files were stacked on a trolley, in two slanting rows. The nurse in charge of them was working hard, keeping up the banter as she passed with folders and xrays.

"We'll just pop that over here for you, and the radiologist will call you in."

"We're not allowed nail polish – I love the blue!"

There was no way of telling how long each woman would spend behind the dark grey door. A few came out fully dressed and headed straight for the exit, but if a woman in a white coat came out first, then they followed the envelope she held to join a new queue on a banquette further down the hall. These women carried clothes in a basket and wore a hospital gown. Some of them were quite young. Constance wasn't the youngest there that morning, not by any means.

Meanwhile, the woman sitting beside her had very large thighs, one of which pressed against Constance, as it overspilt the narrow confines of the orange stackable chair. The spread of her bottom also made for a bit of a squash and, occasionally, Constance felt the press of her left arm. The fat was a little cooler than you might expect, but it contained a deep secret warmth, and was surprisingly pleasant for being so very soft. Constance had plenty of time to notice this and to think about it, the idea that a man might close his eyes and just sink in.

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The woman made a lot of fuss with her bag and her coat and with an extra plastic bag. She got up at one point and came back with a bottle of water, obliging her body back in to the space she had left and holding the bottle for a long time before leaning forward again





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to stow it by her feet. She wore boots with no laces under under a large cheesecloth skirt and when she took off the too-tight cardigan you saw that the cuffs of her blouse didn't go around her wrists. Nothing seemed to close on her. There was the sense of someone whose weight overtook them so fast, they had no idea what size they were anymore. The woman pushed the sleeves up in the hospital heat and reached down one more time for the water. As she did so, Constance noticed some stripes on her forearm: silvery, like the negative of a tattoo, they were all going across the way, with a faint flush of red along the edges where they pushed into the pillow of flesh. Some of the stripes were so close together, they merged into bands, and the effect was not unattractive until you realised that these stripes were scars and that they must be self-inflicted, not over the course of one day or several days, but over years. Her own skin tightened at the thought of it. Constance realised the older marks were wider because she was bigger now, so you could date the things almost, like the rings in a tree. The uncut flesh was being filled in as the woman ran out of space, and some of the older, broader scars had been cut and cut again. Constance felt a pain shoot the length of her thighs, just at the thought of it – or not a pain so much as a weakness, a sympathetic jolt. Sudden, and then over. She stirred in the plastic chair and it was gone.

The woman unscrewed the cap off the water bottle, then looked her way.

"One euro seventy," she said.

"No," said Constance, trying to look back at her. Which was difficult.

"For water!"

She avoided the woman's neck and chest, hovered along her hairline, before settling on her eyes. It was a lived-in face, unmarked, ordinary enough.

"They have you every way," she said.

The woman was trying to lose a bit, she said. She had a wedding coming up. Her niece was getting married in seven weeks and she

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had a great outfit she found in Marks and Spencers and she just had to lose a bit to get into the skirt. She could get into it alright, she just had to zip it up. The thing was, she had terrible bloat.

She looked across the corridor as she talked about the weight; her head swaying slightly from side to side, like a boxer.

"What you need is a pair of Spanx," said Constance.

"You think?"

"Some kind of magic knickers, anyway. Pull you right in."

The woman glanced round at her, suspicious.

"You know the ones," said Constance.

"Oh yeah right."

"You have to try on a couple," said Constance. "Depending on where you need it."

"Right."

The woman turned back to look at the far wall. The affronted set of her mouth said that she had a crap life, and besides the problem wasn't fat, as she'd already made clear, the problem was the bloat. Her problems were both very large and very vague. They were certainly not going to be solved by knickers.

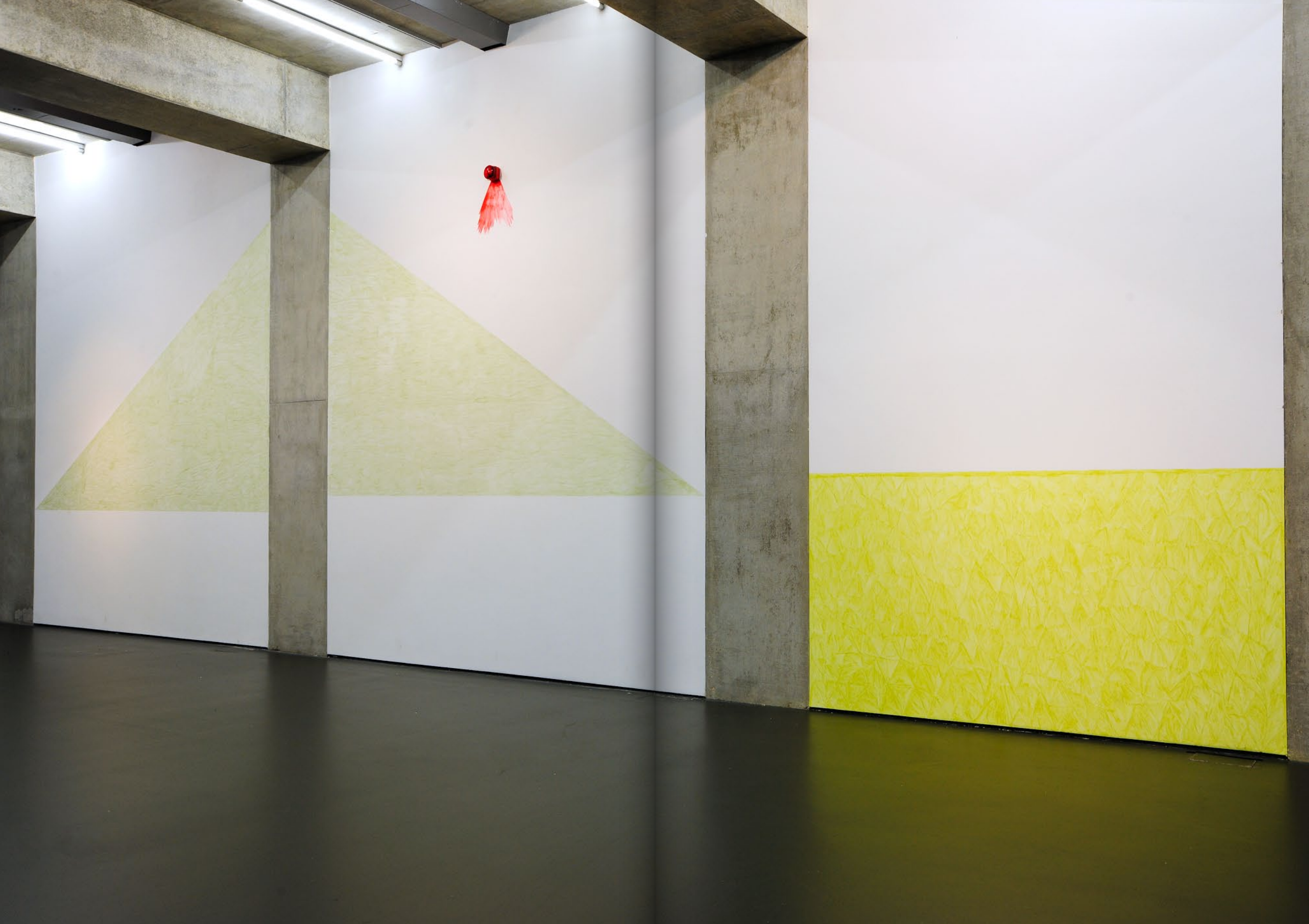
Well either you zip up the damn skirt or you don't zip up your skirt, that's the bottom line of it, said Constance. Not out loud, of course. In her head. And though there was little to be done for her, the woman's life was so terrible, her flesh so insistent beside her on those little plastic chairs, that Constance found herself saying: "You could do the protein thing for maybe, like, a week before? That really shifts the water weight. Eggs, chicken. Nothing else. But it's like, you know," and she whooshed her hands vaguely downwards, "It all flushes out of you."

The woman lowered her head again, like a cow refusing an open gate.

"Mind you," said Constance. "One crisp and it all goes back on. You're back at square one."

"You can say that again."

They lapsed back into silence. After a while the woman said,



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“Huh.”

She did not have breast cancer, clearly, or if she had it would only be by coincidence. A double tragedy. How could you even find a lump in there, with all that fat? She was an attention seeker or she was institutionalised, she was someone who needed to queue. It was possible her file was not even there among the other files on the metal trolley, that she had just walked in and sat down. Constance went to school with someone who liked to go to funerals, and she always took the sandwiches or whatever was on of-



fer and in recent years she showed up whether she knew the dead person or not. The fat woman was a hypochondriac, you could not cure her because there was nothing wrong with her – apart from everything, of course. Everything was wrong with her, and that is what kept her coming back for more.

All this ran through Constance, and she shook her head to clear it. Because it wasn't the fat woman she was thinking about, it

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was someone else. Her mother perhaps, or her friend, Lauren. Women with problems.

Was there any other kind? The thought made her sigh, as she unstuck the back of her leg from the plastic seat, to let the blood back into her numb foot – there was a slightly panicked sensation as it pushed its way back through each tiny and resisting vein and Constance felt how multiple the body was, even something as simple as her leg. Her hand was touching her breast, now, before she was even aware of it, where it merged with her armpit;



feeling the lace of her bra, and under that a softness and under that again vague knots.

The women overlapped, one getting undressed in a curtained cubicle while the person ahead of her was in with the radiologist, so Constance did not know how the fat woman had fared by the time she was called through the dark grey door. She faced the back wall of the cubicle and took off her cardigan and t-shirt, she



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put them in the basket with her coat and bag and she inserted her arms into the sleeves of the hospital gown, then she sat on the little bench and waited again. Now that she was private, she lifted the gown and felt her breast properly, looking for the spot. The thing moved like it was full of liquid, or gel, with odd densities in its depths, most of them anchored to her chest wall. She did not, the GP told her, have especially lumpy breasts, but Constance did think it was a bit porridgy in there, and though she liked the look of breasts – even her own, indeed – although she saw something elegant in the orb of them, she wondered what men wanted when they wanted to push a woman’s chest around. Her fingertips tested each little lump, checking for sensation, and then they found the place, a small, slippery mass, like a piece of gristle, that moved around and did not answer her touch. This was the thing to look for: a part of you that could not feel. Just a tiny part. And the reason it could not feel was that it was not you.

Constance was thirty six, for God’s sake. She did not have cancer. It was just a cyst or duct, some change since the children. She did not have cancer, even though she was that bit overweight, and that bit over the limit when it came to alcohol intake. She had three children and a husband to look after, not to mention her parents at home. She did not have the time.

She would be fine.

The nurse came back and called Constance through the final door, where the radiologist waited beside a big white machine, smiling.

“You can slip off the gown for me there,” she said, because people were always ‘slipping’ in and out of things in hospitals, no one ever just took off their clothes. But the cotton felt light as it left her; Constance put it on the indicated chair and turned around.

There was no trace of the fat woman left in the room, but the recent fact of her made Constance grateful, as she walked up to the machine, for the lesser disaster of her bare torso at thirty six, thinking, “This is the chest my husband loves and my children

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will love for a few years yet, and I never loved it, not much, why should I?”

Not that she would wish them gone.

“And where is the area of concern?” said the radiologist as she scooped a breast up on to the glass covered platform. She did not



wear gloves but her little hand was so easy and expert that Constance felt almost soothed by it. The last person she had loaded up on to the machine was the fat woman and Constance tried to imagine what all that looked like, or felt like, up close. She wanted to know about the cutting and where, on her body, did it stop. So many different people, and the stories their bodies held: she wondered how many times a day the radiologist lifted this part of a woman on to the ledge of her machine, and pressed the



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top plate down to the point of pain. She judged it well, at any rate. At just the moment Constance drew in a sharp breath, she disappeared behind the control panel and its protective window; there was a buzzing, then a beep, and the machine, as though in relief, let her go.

When she was done Constance followed the technician, her eyes on the A4 envelope, her gown barely fastened at the back, and sat beside the fat woman on the banquette.

"My God," said the fat woman.

"Well that's that bit done," said Constance.

"Dear Jesus God almighty," she said. "I thought I was in for my thyroid." Then she talked about her bloat again. There was no stopping her. Something had been unleashed by their shared experience of the room. She said sometimes she didn't go for two weeks, by which she meant a number two.

"Oh dear," said Constance. "Oh that's a very long time." She was going to suggest that the woman drink more water, but then caught herself. The fat woman did not want to be better. She wanted to speak. So Constance let her speak, and did her best not to hear what followed. The cutting continued on the soft inside of her arms and on her wrists, but Constance could not make her eyes go there. She tried not to look at the parts of the fat woman's body that were exposed by the gown, or to see the unclean strap of her bra in the basket at her feet. Did the scar tissue feel, she wondered. Was the shiny skin numb or was it more helpless, now, to whatever brushed against it?

The woman from Monasterevin came out of the mammogram room, and sat in on the banquette, the three of them draped in their gowns.

"I thought they were checking my thyroid," said the fat woman.

"Oh, That'll be next," said the woman from Monasterevin, who was wearing very reassuring, elegant shoes. And, "God love her," she said, after the fat woman was called in for her ultrasound.

"God love us all," said Constance.





COLOPHON

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*“By means of these beginnings, these slight differences, and the
appeal... of my carefully subdued, reserved manner, I shall attract to
myself one intimate friend, whom I shall influence deeply.”*
– Bishop, Elizabeth. *‘In Prison’*. *Collected Prose*. Chatto & Windus,
1994: p.190.

