

I scarcely dared to look

ELIZABETH BISHOP

BY NORA SØ

At 18, Elizabeth Bishop abruptly left a family gathering and hitchhiked to her boarding school, where a policeman found her asleep on the steps the next morning. For the rest of her life Bishop kept travelling — adventurous, lost, or both — to make her home. The carefully crafted imagery and delicate meter of her poems earned her a place among America's most respected poets, but her friends also

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remember a vulnerability that she kept hidden from the world. Whether she was teaching in Cambridge or living in Brazil, Bishop disliked sharing her personal life with critics, interviewers, and often even her friends. “Almost nothing I’ve said about Elizabeth’s life would she want said,” remarked Frank Bidart in an interview. “That’s why, after her death, I decided I didn’t want to be the source of anything that appeared in print about her drinking, sexual life, etc. But the intensity of interest in her work, and the nature of contemporary biography, made revelations that she would have found intolerable in her lifetime inevitable.”

Bishop’s poetry drew on her experience, but more often from the world around her than from her own emotions. “I hate self-pity poems,” she said, although the struggles and tragedies throughout her life could have provided ample opportunity for them. Bishop’s father died in 1911, several months after she was born, and her mother fell into deep mourning and mental instability, and was institutionalized when Bishop was 5. She had an unmoored childhood, spending several years in rural Nova Scotia with her maternal grandparents, less than a year with her paternal grandparents in Worcester, and several years with her aunt in Boston before attending boarding school and then Vassar College. Yet when her poems draw on experiences from those times, the vivid scenes they paint still leave the poet obscure:

“It was winter. It got dark early. The waiting room was full of grown-up people, arctics and overcoats, lamps and magazines.”

—excerpt from “In the Waiting Room”

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These crystalline images are as indicative of her writing as the loneliness they evoke is of her life. The subtle solitude of these lines stayed with Bishop from the childhood moment (visiting the dentist with her aunt at age 7), through the publication of the poem more than 50 years later.

Bishop was first published in 1935, a year after graduating from college, when the poet Marianne Moore selected three of her poems for an anthology. Moore was the first of many influential writers whose support would guide Bishop’s professional and personal life: across the years her friends would often look after her, nominating her for awards, recommending her for jobs, taking her to the hospital, and once even moving all her furniture into a new apartment. Among them, Robert “Cal” Lowell stands out as a lifelong advocate of her writing and one of her most trusted friends. The two met at a party in 1947 and took to each other instantly—a rarity for the reclusive Bishop. “She liked Cal Lowell. She liked him and his work,” recalls Bishop’s friend Joseph Frank. “She had a liking for things that were harsh.... I think she liked the kind of knottiness and also a certain pitiless quality of his sensibility.”

Bishop and Lowell’s extensive correspondence—which provides the text for *Dear Elizabeth*—was due in part to the fact that Bishop traveled throughout her life. After college she and Louise Crane, whom she knew from Vassar, visited Europe. The two returned to the States in 1938 and set up a residence in Key West, Florida, where Bishop lived for nine years, although Crane left after a year. In 1951, Bishop made an impromptu voyage to Brazil. While staying with her friends she had an allergic reaction to cashews and was nursed back to health by Lota de Macedo Soares, an aristocratic Brazilian woman with a passion for painting and architecture. By the time Bishop had recovered, Lota had invited her to stay. She did, for 15 years.

Throughout this time, Bishop was always writing, but slowly—it might take years for a poem to come together. She didn’t subscribe to any theoretical approaches, but employed her strong command of meter and rhythm in a variety of forms to create mesmerizing and moving images. After fighting with her publishers over the limited quantity of her new work, her second book,

Poems: North & South — A Cold Spring, incorporated her first volume alongside 18 new poems. Nevertheless, it earned her the Pulitzer Prize in 1956, which delighted Bishop because it prompted not only the Brazilian literary circles that had dismissed her but also the local fruit vendors to recognize her as a respected poet. Her next volume, *Questions of Travel*, was published in 1965 and drew on life in Nova Scotia and New England as well as in Brazil:

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams hurry too rapidly down to the sea, and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion, turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.

—excerpt from “Questions of Travel”

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In the 1960s, the home that Bishop and Lota had set up in Brazil began to fall apart. Bishop's fierce intelligence, acerbic wit, and clear poetic talent were married with a social anxiety and a lifelong struggle with alcoholism that often fed off each other, creating disastrous downward spirals. Her drinking was one source of tension between her and Lota; another was Lota's increased involvement in politics, which left Bishop feeling neglected. She began traveling before moving to Seattle in 1966 to teach for a year. Although she returned to Brazil, Lota's deteriorating health caused her doctor to recommend that the two have some distance. “I don't know what is right really, and wish God would lean down and tell me,” Bishop wrote to her friend as she planned to move to New York in 1967. “I hate to leave Lota like this, but it seems almost as if it were a question of my own life or sanity, too, now.” Bishop went to New York that September. Against advice, Lota joined her there several months later and died within a week, overdosing on Valium.

Lota was buried in Brazil and, after meeting hostility from their friends and Lota's family, Bishop moved to San Francisco, where her literary style was at odds with the 1960s counterculture. In 1970 — as another relationship fell apart — she won the National Book Award and moved to Boston to take over Lowell's teaching position at Harvard. She needed the stable employment, although she was ill at ease when teaching and keenly aware that her poetic success fell within a limited sphere. A friend recalls Bishop looking through *The Modern Poet*, with essays on Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman but nothing on her, and remarking, “It's like being buried alive.”

Her position at Harvard ended in 1977, and that year her *Geography III* brought her a new level of public recognition; the slender collection includes a variety of forms, from the strict rhythm scheme of “One Art” (included in *Dear Elizabeth*) to the narrative poem “Crusoe in England.” As one of her students recalled, “Her life was often out of control, but her poetry is precise.” The critical acclaim sparked by *Geography III* continued to grow after Bishop died of a brain aneurysm in 1979. Once considered “a poet's poet,” today her writing holds a place within any anthology of American poetry.

Although Bishop was lauded for her pristine images and precise language, an uncertain sense of self flits behind many of her poems: “I scarcely dared to look / to see what it was I was,” she writes in “In the Waiting Room.” Throughout her life Bishop struggled with her identity, and any answer to that personal question, Who am I? was unvoiced. She rarely spoke with even her closest friends about her childhood, sexuality, or alcoholism, and she hated when others applied labels to her life or her work. She refused to have her poems included in anthologies selected around gender, and her work defied the artistic camps — new formalist, free verse, beat, or confessional — that were pitched around her. In so many ways Bishop lived a life apart, and with that came both loneliness and individuality. The poems that she left reveal a rich talent, but for a sense of the woman Lowell knew so well we must turn to her letters, the memories of her friends, and our own imaginations, and ultimately content ourselves with imperfect discoveries.