



Life Studies

A college dropout working as a secretary sneaked into a poetry workshop led by Robert Lowell and changed her prospects forever.
By Megan Marshall.

OPEN BOOK
MARISA BERENSON'S GAZE DRIFTS UP IN ELISABETTA CATALANO'S PHOTOGRAPH FOR VOGUE, 1970.

I was the worst kind of student poet, nearly illiterate in contemporary poetry and writing to resolve a feeling of drift that had overtaken me the year before as a junior at Bennington College. And I wasn't a student. My restlessness had led me to drop out of college—schoolwork, even at Bennington, which gave no grades, felt like too much pressure—and move to Cambridge, taking a room in a communal apartment at \$27 a month (heat not included) and a secretarial job at Harvard, working in the college registrar's office in the Holyoke Center, just one floor below the conference room where I was now sitting. Getting a position in one of Harvard's many administrative offices, I'd heard, was an easy matter if you could pass the typing test.

That was the winter of the energy crisis, 1973–74, a particularly cold one, and the cost of heating oil had skyrocketed, making the low rent a doubtful bargain. From my room on the top floor of a River Street tenement, which swayed in the wind blowing up off the Charles, I checked the temperature on the electrified Coca-Cola sign across the river each morning before venturing outside, passing a long row of cars puffing steam as their drivers waited in line for the cheapest gas in town at the ARCO station up the street. The first glimmer of hope that I'd find my way arrived as a fleeting sense of joy that I wasn't living in Southern California, where I'd grown up, dependent on a car to get anywhere, or Bennington, where it

was so much colder. Still, I walked the mile to work at Harvard's new ten-story concrete-and-glass administration building in the center of Harvard Square, saving bus fare so I could afford the steeply discounted therapy sessions that anchored my days.

My job required me to type information gleaned from the application folders of the incoming freshman class onto permanent record cards, on which student grades would be entered over the next four years. Into my humming IBM Selectric typewriter I rolled a stiff 8½-by-11-inch white card printed horizontally with blanks for name, birth date, home address, high school, and SAT scores along the top, and spaces for eight semesters of grades below. Next I opened an application folder and soon became lost in the drama of an accepted student's personal essay, letters of recommendation, and the admissions committee's notes. "GOOD HARVARD SON" appeared with predictable frequency, scrawled across an application's first page.

It pained me to read the heartfelt words of those academically well-fed young men and women so close to my own age, the praise that poured forth from their teachers. I typed out unfamiliar names—the Pingree School, Groton, New Trier High School, Milton Academy—many times over. No one from my high school in Pasadena, a relatively new one built to accommodate baby-boom teenagers, had ever attended Harvard; I'd been turned down when I applied. But I couldn't stop reading, even NOSTALGIA>308

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when my supervisor chided me for taking so long with what should have been a simple task.

Maybe it was then that I started to become a shadow student, began to wish for school again. I learned which dorms I could enter by following a resident closely and catching the door; which cafeterias I could access through an unguarded exit to help myself to yogurt and cereal at breakfast. I wasn't earning much, but that wasn't the only reason I sometimes sat alone with my stolen meal in the company of Harvard students in the high-ceilinged Freshman Union; my roommates on River Street were all grad students in their late 20s, caught up in radical politics, and I felt even more a stranger there.

So I auditioned for the new Harvard-Radcliffe choir for mixed voices—established two years before, when the dorms had gone coed and open to faculty and staff as well as students—but I hid my secretary status from the other altos when I got in. A piano-practice room at street level in Adams House caught my eye, and soon I was writing my name on the sign-up sheet and spending an hour at the Steinway grand whenever I could.

I began to write again, too. My mother had taught me to love poetry, reading aloud at bedtime from children's anthologies; her mother had sung to me settings from Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* while I lay on my parents' bed after school and watched her iron my father's shirts that my working mother didn't have time to press. I'd begun writing poetry at age eight, and my mother helped me mail one of my rhymes to the editor of the children's page at the local paper; it earned me publication and a few dollars in prize money.

The poems I submitted a dozen years later for admission to Robert Lowell's workshop class in January 1975 were written out of ignorance, scribbled in notebooks with little more skill than Marisa Berenson's stunning portrait-of-the-artist-with-flower-in-hand appears to demonstrate. In this picture she gazes up, her thoughts far from the page, seemingly too enthralled by her photographer to concentrate on her task. I also struggled with focus and quit the job at Harvard to work as a research assistant and typist for a famous writer in Boston. He wrote at night and slept during the day, and our meetings took place at dinnertime in his town-house apartment. He liked my work. He liked me—in the halter-topped minidress I'd resurrected from my California wardrobe to wear out to dinner at Cafe Amalfi. I'd come to expect this sort of thing; it happened with music teachers, professors, a camp counselor. The attentions of a famous writer are flattering. I slept with him and told him I enjoyed it, half believing it was so; I needed to keep my job. Yet where could this lead?

I'd saved enough money to pay for three courses as an unenrolled "special" student at Harvard, two literature seminars on

English novels and the Romantics and Lowell's workshop, if I could get in. I'd applied to the class not having read a line of his poetry. Still, in an uncanny way, I'd written poems that aped Lowell's style or appealed to his sensibility—one, titled "Through-Composed," employed the term for a piece of music without repeated themes or cadences as a metaphor signifying the challenge of living into an unknown future. When I read my name on the list of ten accepted students posted on the ninth-floor conference-room door in early February, I quit working for the famous writer, who punched me in the shoulder and then stomped on my foot on the brick sidewalk in front of his apartment building as I left. I could get along for the next four months on my savings and food stamps, and look for a summer job after that.

Professor Lowell, rumpled and wild-eyed, shuffling in his loafers as if they were bedroom slippers, was an irregular participant in his own class that semester. Sometimes his protégé Frank Bidart appeared in his place, explaining a mixup in the poet's medications. Family members sat in: the poet's third wife, Lady Caroline Blackwood, bright-blonde, and thin in the way of chain-smokers; Lowell's teenage daughter, Harriet, sullen, restless.

I'd been studying Lowell's poems assiduously since gaining admission to the class. On his good days, he recited his favorite poems—William Carlos Williams's "The Yachts" or John Donne's "The Relic"—marveling at excellent lines and turns of phrase, making us love them too. Best were the days when it was my turn to have a submission discussed. Our professor read aloud from our manuscripts, and in his sure voice my words became something more than private lament—poetry?

But none of this prepared me for an April afternoon when I entered the classroom to find a small older woman with short, stylishly coiffed white hair, clad in

an elegant light-wool suit and carrying a thin black binder, taking a seat across the conference table from mine. Professor Lowell introduced his friend Elizabeth Bishop—"Miss Bishop," he purred in his Southern-tinged Boston Brahmin drawl. I gazed beyond her to the cityscape captured in the conference room's picture windows. And then our guest began to read in a low, hoarse smoker's voice, smoothed out with the buttery "r's" of New England's upper crust: "A new volcano has erupted,/the papers say, and last week I was reading/where some ship saw an island being born."

This was Elizabeth Bishop's "Crusoe in England," a new poem not yet available in any book. She'd transported me to another world—where women were writers, and men, shambling and erratic as they might be, were their friends. I wanted to stay there. □

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WELL VERSED
THE AUTHOR AS A TEEN IN 1971.
SHORTLY BEFORE LEAVING HER NATIVE
CALIFORNIA FOR THE NORTHEAST.