

Dark, Deep and Absolutely Clear

Observation is the spine of Bishop's poems, swiftly moving from a thing or place to the visionary

Elizabeth Bishop

By Megan Marshall
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BY DAVID MASON

NEARLY 40 YEARS after her death, Elizabeth Bishop (1911-79) is one of the most admired of all modern American poets, a writer who turned damaged reticence into high art. To use her own definition of poetry, she caught "mind in action," fashioning luminous experiences in poems and a handful of short stories. As Megan Marshall writes in her elegant, moving biography, Bishop was fascinated by the "surrealism of everyday life." Meticulous observation was the spine of her writing, which often begins with description, moving through it to the visionary:

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones, icily free above the stones, above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in, your wrist would ache immediately, your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn as if the water were a transmutation of fire. . . .

These lines from "At the Fishhouses" suggest a psychic breakthrough few poets ever achieve, a rush of rhythm and piercing insight.

Yet Bishop was heroic in her rectitude, publishing only 100 poems in her lifetime. She infused her poems with intelligence and surprise, her personal griefs, visible in a poem like "One Art," often subsumed by attention to the world's "vaster" absurdities, terrors and sorrows. Her stubborn imperviousness to categories frustrated more political writers, like Adrienne Rich, who wanted to include her work in an anthology of "women poets"—Bishop's poems are accessible to anyone. "Pink Dog," for example, is a heartbreaking portrait of an animal in a Brazilian slum at carnival time, reflecting Bishop's own vulnerability and desire to carry on. Another expressive dog appears in "Five Flights Up":

The little black dog runs in his yard. His owner's voice arises, stern, "You ought to be ashamed!" What has he done?
He bounces cheerfully up and down: he rushes in circles in the fallen leaves.

Obviously he has no sense of shame. He and the bird know everything is answered, all taken care of, no need to ask again. —Yesterday brought to today so lightly!
(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)



WATER'S EDGE A harbor in Nova Scotia. Bishop evoked her childhood years there in poems such as "At the Fishhouses."

Her compassion is fierce and exacting, sometimes wryly funny. One poem imagines an armadillo clenched like a fist, another a nervous sandpiper searching every grain of sand on a beach: "The world is a mist. And then the world is / minute and vast and clear." By contrast, the enormous output of her more famous friend, the so-called confessional poet Robert Lowell, seems at times like brilliant journaling. Bishop believed poetry should do more than just "say what happened," as Lowell had once written. It should make a new experience.

Her life has been the subject of studies like Lorrie Goldensohn's "Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry" (1991) and Brett C. Millier's "Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It" (1992) and even a movie, "Reaching for the Moon" (2013), about her tumultuous relationship with the Brazilian landscape architect Lota de Macedo Soares. "One Art," a

volume of her letters, appeared in 1994, followed by "Words in Air," her correspondence with Lowell, in 2008. A controversial collection of her early and uncollected writings, "Edgar Allan Poe and the Jukebox," appeared in 2006, a Library of America volume of her work in 2008. Bishop is so ubiquitous that she could disappear in a landslide of commentary.

We've long known about her same-sex orientation, the death of her father when she was an infant, the madness and institutionalization of her mother when Elizabeth was only 3, her lifelong battles with alcoholism. Taking up this biography, I sometimes felt that I could not possibly learn anything new. I was wrong. To begin with, Ms. Marshall was privy to letters kept by Bishop's last lover, Alice Methfessel, and only made available on Alice's death in 2009. "What I read brought tears," Ms. Marshall writes: "In letters written to her psychoana-

lyst, Elizabeth described in alarming detail her harrowing childhood . . . ; letters to and from Lota de Macedo Soares recorded the crises of the last years in Brazil. Hundreds of pages of letters exchanged with Alice Methfes-

Bishop's sense of privacy arose from shame at the violence and sexual abuse she suffered from an uncle.

sel showed what the couple had never revealed in public or even to close friends: a passionate and abiding love." Bishop's highly developed sense of privacy arose from early shame. Now we know the particular violent and sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of an uncle—one of a network of relatives she lived with in her

mother's absence as she was shuttled back and forth between Canada and Massachusetts. Her psychiatrist later told her, Ms. Marshall writes, that "she was lucky to have survived her childhood."

But "Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast" has more to recommend it than these shocking revelations. It is a shapely experiment, mixing memoir with biography. Ms. Marshall was Bishop's student at Harvard in the 1970s and felt her own shame and losses occluding their relationship. Her experience as a young woman and aspiring writer casts Bishop's struggles in fresh light. Noting that "Elizabeth became the first woman to teach an advanced writing class at Harvard and the first woman poet to have her name published in a course catalogue," Ms. Marshall conveys the writing world's damaging social hierarchies, its systems of patronage and approval, the entrenched sexism of the time and the precariousness of creative lives. The book begins with a memorial for Bishop at which the poet John Ashbery read her early sestina "A Miracle for Breakfast," an uncanny response to the Great Depression:

At six o'clock we were waiting for coffee, waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb that was going to be served from a certain balcony, —like kings of old, or like a miracle. It was still dark. One foot of the sun steadied itself on a long ripple in the river.

Mr. Ashbery had discovered the poem when he was an undergraduate, Ms. Marshall writes, and was influenced by it. "He'd felt 'close' to her ever since, though like many of her admirers, he scarcely knew Elizabeth Bishop."

The difficulty of knowing another person becomes a theme of Ms. Marshall's book. Each of her six major chapters takes for its title one of the six end words used in each stanza of "A Miracle for Breakfast," and in turn each chapter is followed by a briefer memoir of Ms. Marshall's life, her own family wreckage and conflicted relationship with her subject. The structure shouldn't work, but it does, by involving us in recognition—like the epiphany Bishop so dramatically evoked in her late poem "In the Waiting Room":

I said to myself: three days and you'll be seven years old. I was saying it to stop the sensation of falling off the round, turning world into cold, blue-black space. But I felt: you are an I, you are an Elizabeth, you are one of them.

Though ashamed by some of her relatives and wounded by childhood trials, Bishop had been left a small legacy that allowed her to live and

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The Many Arts of Elizabeth Bishop

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write. She was a contradiction, writes Ms. Marshall: “an orphan heirless who’d spent her happiest childhood years among tradespeople, a Vassar girl whose home address was a dingy working-class suburb.” When she graduated from Vassar in 1934 she was already meeting her more renowned elders, including Marianne Moore, who “served as her sponsor, describing Elizabeth’s work as ‘archaically new’ and praising its ‘rational considering quality’ as well as her ‘flicker of impudence.’” Once Bishop had met Lowell, with his patrician knack for winning fellowships and prizes, she gained the protection of powerful literary figures from her own generation. Her poetry was taken up by the *New Yorker*, where she would publish many of her best poems until her death by cerebral aneurysm at age 68.

While Bishop never achieved the financial success she hoped for from her prose, she was in her lifetime seen as a “poet’s poet” whose impeccable craftsmanship merited esteem. The fact that she was not prolific, that her “perfect” poems appeared so rarely, only increased their value in literary circles. A dual volume,

“Poems: North & South; A Cold Spring,” won the Pulitzer Prize in 1956. “Questions of Travel” appeared a decade later, followed in 1969 by “The Complete Poems,” which won the National Book Award, and in 1976 by “Geography III,” a volume containing only nine marvelous poems and one translation.

Fifteen years of living in Brazil with Lota de Macedo Soares provided her longest period of stability and happiness. The sharp divide between rich and poor in that country “both disturbed Elizabeth and fired her imagination,” Ms. Marshall writes. “As always for Elizabeth, Lota—whether changing a tire on the roadside, firing her .22 to kill a snake or dancing a samba—was ‘wonderful in action.’” Lota’s modernist home in the Brazilian countryside and apartment in Rio made Bishop part of a privileged class. It gave her autonomy to develop as an artist far from American literary politics. One of her best love poems, “The Shampoo,” was written early in their time together.

But Lota sought patronage in a politically unstable nation. Becoming obsessed with her work designing Rio’s vast Flamengo Park, she

“worked eighteen-hour days and was hardly ever at home, except to sleep and shout into the phone,” while Bishop’s drinking and an affair with another woman also soured the relationship. By the end Lota was descending into self-doubt and madness. The couple separated. Bishop taught writing briefly at the University of Washington, starting another affair, and eventually moved back to New York. On a visit there in 1967, Lota succumbed to an overdose of pills, whether accidental or deliberate. As Bishop had written years before in a letter: “Nobody’s heart is really good for much until it has been smashed to little bits.”

The poet Randall Jarrell, who wrote enthusiastic praise of Bishop’s poems, had died in 1965, struck by a car, but was it an accident or suicide? Sylvia Plath had killed herself in 1963, and Anne Sexton and John Berryman would follow in the 1970s. Bishop, who had a tenuous hold on her own life and was often hospitalized for depression and alcoholism, saw herself as a survivor. At a time when she feared she was losing her decades-younger lover, Alice Methfessel, she produced her best-known poem, “One Art,” declaring with faux bravery:

“The art of losing isn’t hard to master.” Ultimately, she did not lose Alice and was sustained by her love through the last years teaching at Harvard, drinking too much, trying to finish a few more poems.

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Lowell died of a heart attack in a taxi in 1977. He was only 60, worn out by repeated bouts of manic depression as well as booze and tobacco. Though they had spent very little time together, he and Bishop maintained an intense friendship, measuring themselves and the world in each other’s words. Ms. Marshall writes that Lowell’s “brashness, his sloppiness when it came to others’ feelings, had won him an audience in the age of poetic self-revelation he’d ushered in with ‘Life Studies’ ” (his breakthrough collection published in 1959). For Bishop, on the other hand, “keeping secrets made her poems tell

more.” Her very privacy, her guardianship of the imagination and respect for the actual world of other creatures, other people, made her the remarkable poet she was.

Writing to the poet Anne Stevenson, an early biographer, Bishop succinctly stated her poetics: “What one seems to want in art . . . is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration. (In this sense it is always ‘escape,’ don’t you think?)” Now Ms. Marshall rises to her elusive subject: “Characteristically, she had rendered her most important statement as a parenthetical aside, followed by a question. But she knew the answer. Poetry had been her refuge, her escape—had ‘freed’ her. Elizabeth was the rainbow-bird, as she had been the sandpiper, only now it was time to stop ‘looking for something, something something’ and run away to wherever she felt like. She too was gone.” This new biography fuses sympathy with intelligence, sending us back to Bishop’s marvelous poems.

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