

## ELIZABETH BISHOP

**Born:** Worcester, Massachusetts; February 8, 1911

**Died:** Boston, Massachusetts; October 6, 1979

*Highly praised for a small oeuvre of carefully crafted poems, Bishop is known as an accessible modern poet with an eye for detail.*

### BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Bishop was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, the daughter of Thomas and Gertrude Bulmer Bishop. Both of her parents were of Canadian heritage, but her paternal grandfather had left Prince Edward Island to establish a well-known building firm in Worcester that was responsible for such landmark buildings as the Boston Public Library and Museum of Fine Arts.

Bishop's father died a few months after her birth, and as a result of this her mother suffered a breakdown and was treated in a sanatorium in Boston. In 1916, her mother returned to Canada for further treatment in proximity to her family, but the result was another breakdown that required her confinement in a mental hospital in Nova Scotia, where she remained until her death in 1934. Effectively an orphan, therefore, Elizabeth passed her early childhood with her mother's family in Great Village, Nova Scotia; some of her poems reflect memories of this time.

At the age of six, Bishop was taken to live with her paternal grandparents in Worcester. Some critics have suggested that she sensed the move as something like an expulsion from paradise and that images of simplicity and family affection such as she had known in Great Village continued all of her life to represent life's highest good. In Worcester she began to be frequently ill, suffering again from the bronchitis she had contracted in Great Village, to which were added asthma and a number of other diseases. In order to give her happier surroundings, her grandfather arranged for her to live with her mother's sister in Boston. From the age of eight, she began to read poetry and fairy tales; she has mentioned Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins as early poetic favorites.

Bishop entered boarding school at the age of sixteen, at the Walnut Hill School in Nantick. There she read the works of William Shakespeare and the English Romantic poets. She entered Vassar College with the intention of studying music, but later she told an interviewer that she was so terrified by the thought of recitals that she gave up the idea. In college she founded a literary review, called *Con Spirito*, with other literary-minded students, among them Mary McCarthy and Eleanor Clark, both of them subsequently well-known novelists. Bishop's first poems appeared there and later in the *Vassar Review*; many of these appear in the standard volume of her life work, *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (1983). During her time at Vassar, Bishop began bouts of heavy drinking that affected her writing output and her health for the rest of her life.

The greatest poetic mentor of Bishop's early years was Marianne Moore, who helped to get some of Bishop's poems published in an anthology called *Trial Balances* (1935). Bishop's first volume was *North and South* (1946), which was chosen for the Houghton Mifflin Poetry Award and which includes her most anthologized single poem, "The Fish." That same year she met poet Robert Lowell, with whom she maintained a lifelong friendship based on their mutual admiration for each other's works. In 1949, Bishop moved to Washington, D.C., in order to accept the post of poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. It was then that she visited the poet Ezra Pound, incarcerated in St. Elizabeths Hospital; the result of this was the poem "Visits to St. Elizabeths." Further awards came soon after, including the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in 1950 and the Lucy

Martin Donnelly Fellowship from Bryn Mawr College in 1951.

With the money from her prizes, Bishop set out for a trip to Brazil, where allergic attacks forced her to stay for a number of months. Once cured, she decided to stay on and, in fact, lived in Brazil for most of the rest of her life, returning to the United States only a few years before her death. During her time there, she met and fell in love with a Brazilian woman, Lota de Macedo Soares. The two lived together until Soares's suicide in 1967. In 1955, she published her next book, which included *North and South*, by then out of print, as well as her newer poems; the volume was titled *Poems: North and South—A Cold Spring*. Among the new poems was the widely acclaimed "At the Fishhouses." Much of her subsequent work, until the mid-1970's, touched upon her life in Brazil, including the volume *Questions of Travel* (1965). This was followed, in 1976, by *Geography III*. The prematurely titled *The Complete Poems* of 1969 won the National Book Award, and *Geography III* won a National Book Critics Circle Award. Bishop was the recipient of honorary degrees from Rutgers University and Brown University. She died of a cerebral aneurism in Boston in 1979.

#### ANALYSIS

Bishop held a unique place in American poetry during her lifetime, and after her death she has come to seem one of the few truly durable and original voices of twentieth century poetry. An accessible voice in a period of frequently puzzling poets, Bishop's style was marked by precision and clarity, so that many critics have spoken of her work as a logical development of Imagism, the short-lived school of precise observation and clipped phrases of Pound and F. S. Flint in the early years of the century. The single most frequently evoked model, however, is Moore, with whom Bishop was friends, and whom she addressed directly in one of her poems, "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore," in *A Cold Spring*. Certainly the link between the two comes readily to mind, not only because of the biographical connection between the two poets but also because of Moore's equally effective choice of precise words to evoke unitary states of things. Recently, however, some critics have challenged this linking.

The particular qualities of her poetry aside, it certainly added to Bishop's mystique that during the period of her greatest fame she lived in Brazil and was rarely seen in the United States. Another factor contributing to her reputation, perhaps paradoxically, was the fact that she wrote relatively little, a factor in part of her recurrent bouts of alcoholism. Her complete poems are contained in a single volume, like those of T. S. Eliot, and can conceivably be read through in a single sitting. In the glut of print in the modern world, the very parsimony of her production came to seem a virtue, as did her insistence on continual revision of the poems.

The impression that an initial reading of Bishop's poetry makes is certainly that of the polished surface. Her words are carefully chosen, her evocations of the physical world precise, ranging from the description of scales on the floor of the fish house ("At the Fishhouses") to the sensations of a child reading *National Geographic* in a dentist's waiting room ("In the Waiting Room," from *Geography III*). Her poems lack an easy moral; critics tend to agree that they avoid coming to overall, or perhaps overly pat, answers about the great themes of human existence. The reader must tease out the meaning, if indeed there is such, from under the shining surface.

As a result, some critics have found that Bishop's poetry lacks substance, an accusation more frequent with respect to her earlier, pre-Brazil poetry (which nevertheless contains many of her most celebrated single works). It is a refusal to disclose secrets, if secrets there be, that the reader senses in these early poems, or an unwillingness on the part of the author to get involved with the world. This changed to some degree when Bishop began to write about Brazil, from whose culture she evidently felt sufficient distance to allow herself to characterize it from the outside, as she was not able to do with North American culture. From the poems about Brazil, as a result, a number of more elemental, slightly less intellectualized human themes emerge, longing for other climes and satisfaction with daily living among them. A number of critics have therefore seen the theme of Bishop's poetry taken as a whole to be that of involvement or noninvolvement with the world. By and large, the earlier poems are perceived as remaining within

the bounds of the self, and the later poetry as being willing to step outside these bounds. Such easy dichotomies are not satisfactory, however, as there are early poems that clearly do take stands on human issues and later ones that do not seem to do so at all.

Critical stances such as these underline the curiously negative quality of most attempts to place Bishop in a larger context, whereby what she does not do becomes more important than what she does. Many social critics understand the twentieth century to be a time when previously hard-and-fast moral and social values were questioned, and they see relativity as the rule not only in physics but also in the world at large. Such critics praise Bishop precisely for having had the taste and sensitivity to avoid giving easy answers. In short, they praise Bishop for not committing certain faults or (as a variation) see the slight air of authorial absence in her poems as itself an indication of the built-in alienation or fragmentation of modern thought.

One critic has suggested that she successfully subverts the now outmoded heroic/masculine vision of the hero, substituting for it a more rational female version. Other critics, more accustomed to poems that contain what has been called “the reek of the human,” fault her poems for seeming to have been written by a “lady” (as well as a woman)—they seem too gentrified, too rarefied. What is certain is that her works avoid vulgarity of surface and vulgarity of message as well, itself an accomplishment of no mean measure.

### “THE FISH”

**First published:** 1946 (collected in *North and South*, 1946)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The narrator catches an old fish, then later lets it go.*

“The Fish” is Bishop’s most anthologized poem. The work is popular because it avoids the surrealism that makes puzzling some of the other poems published in Bishop’s first collection. It is devoted

in large part to a description of a fish that the narrator catches and, in the last line, lets go. The moral suggested is somewhat closer to the surface than is usual for Bishop; in addition, the slight but undeniable sententiousness of the narrator may make it easier for the reader to identify with him or her than with the less characterized and virtually invisible narrators of many of Bishop’s other poems.

The work opens with a simple statement: The narrator has “caught a tremendous fish.” The fish immediately comes to seem somewhat noble, or perhaps resigned: “He didn’t fight./ He hadn’t fought at all.” The reader sees the fish immediately as humanized, both through the male pronoun as well as through the author’s ascription to it of the adjective “venerable.” The narrator clearly reacts to this creature as an equal to an equal, on one hand totally within his or her power, on the other hand a creature into whose eyes he or she looks. The reader is told that the fish’s eyes are “far larger” than those of the narrator, “but shallower, and yellowed.” The most intimate communication with another person frequently takes place through the eyes—so too this contact of fisher and fish.

This fish, however, is the veteran of many previous combats; from his lip hang the remains of five fishhooks. As a result, it seems that the narrator has been victorious where others have failed; the reader is told that “victory filled up/ the little rented boat.” Yet this victory may perhaps be that of the fish, whose hooks have been referred to as “medals”—the fruits of military victory.

The last line reads: “And I let the fish go.” Why “and,” the reader may wonder. This suggests that the narrator’s letting the fish go is the anticlimactic natural result of the fish’s victory, an acknowledgment of the greater nobility of the natural world with respect to the human one. This reaction seems a bit extreme for the situation described; indeed, the slight discomfort the reader may feel with this poem lies in precisely this self-effacement of the narrator before the minutely described denizen of the deep. One may wonder whether human beings are nothing more than creatures to plague a fish.

## “VISITS TO ST. ELIZABETHS”

**First published:** 1950 (collected in *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979, 1983*)

**Type of work:** Poem

*This work describes a visit to a hospital for the mentally ill and to a poet (known to be Ezra Pound) who is incarcerated there.*

“Visits to St. Elizabeths” is the result of Bishop’s visits, while in Washington, D.C., as the poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, to see the great modernist poet Ezra Pound, who had been incarcerated in this mental hospital as an alternative to conviction for treason; he had made purportedly pro-Fascist radio broadcasts on Italian radio during World War II. Bishop’s reaction, characteristically enough, has nothing to do with politics and focuses only on the man in the hospital, who is never named. Yet the poem seems to lose a great deal if the reader is unaware of the poetic stature of Ezra Pound (for some literary historians, the single most original figure of Anglo-American modernism, and at any rate a figure without whom the shape of twentieth century literature would have been vastly different). It helps to have a sense both of Pound’s literary grandeur and stature and of the circumstances to which he had been reduced. The narrator’s meditation involves a realization of both these extremes, of both the splendors and miseries of the poem’s central figure.

The poem is stylistically somewhat peculiar in that it takes a particular metrical prototype as the model which it adopts and then varies, namely the childhood add-on song, “The House That Jack Built.” The echo is made clear by Bishop’s repetition of its basic structure of one line, separated by a blank line from the next group of two, separated in turn from the next group of three, and so on to the final stanza of twelve lines. For example, the first reads, “This is the house of Bedlam,” the second, “This is the man/ that lies in the house of Bedlam.” Already the reader can recognize the reference to the British hospital for the insane at Bethlehem, called Bedlam, whose chaos before the reforms of the nineteenth century has been

preserved in the lowercase use of the noun “bedlam.” The evocation is of lack of order; the man “lies” in this house, rather than, say, living there, as if slumped or quiescent, clearly not a fully functioning human.

As the poem progresses, details are added, but the adjectives applied to the man alter. At first he is “honored,” then he is “old,” “brave,” then “cranky,” “tedious,” and “busy,” and he ends up simply “wretched.” The crazy round of the madhouse is evoked in this alteration of adjectives, as it is in the repetitive, sing-song rhythm of the increasing numbers of lines and details. In reacting to one specific person’s situation, the narrator in this poem (essentially Bishop herself) seems to express a sense of human empathy that is sometimes lacking in Bishop’s more cerebral poems, a realization both of the heights to which individual humans can rise and of the depths to which they can sink. The reader may be left thinking that the wretchedness of this person is not totally unmerited, a situation that may or may not correspond to one’s understanding of the historical Pound but which at any rate makes the contemplation of the situation described in the poem possible rather than merely unbearable.

## “AT THE FISHHOUSES”

**First published:** 1955 (collected in *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979, 1983*)

**Type of work:** Poem

*An unnamed narrator describes a visit to fish houses and talks with an old man.*

Although “At the Fishhouses” consists largely of description, it also seems to offer a formulation of the relation between humans and nature, or humans and truth, which approaches that achieved by some of the poems of Robert Frost, in which daily occurrences are made to yield deeper meanings through a juxtaposition with larger themes. In this poem, furthermore, the precise descriptions that in many of Bishop’s works are simply a fact of style come to take on the quality of content, being put in context by the sudden shift to abstraction of the work’s final six lines.

The self-effacing narrator begins by description, sketching the old man who sits mending his nets, until nearly halfway through, where he or she appears for the first time in a possessive pronoun: The reader is told that this man “was a friend of my grandfather” (the word “I” is not used until even further down). The reader is given the silver surface of the sea, the benches, the lobster pots; even the tubs are lined with iridescent scales on which walk iridescent flies. Suddenly the man becomes real: He accepts a cigarette, a Lucky Strike. A line break introduces the reader to the theme of the water, that element from which come all these silvery riches and that forms the source of this man’s life and livelihood. This separate section of six lines is tied to the first through the theme of color: In the water lie silver tree trunks.

The next section starts again with the water, an “element bearable to no mortal.” The narrator waxes whimsical with memories of singing hymns to a seal, then returns to the water. This is the same sea that the narrator has seen all over the world, yet here it is so cold that no one would even want to put in a hand, for it would make one’s bones ache; if one tasted it, the water would burn the tongue.

This, the narrator reflects finally, “is like what we imagine knowledge to be.” The narrator then enumerates the qualities ascribed to knowledge that, in fact, are possessed by this water:

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, drawn from  
the cold hard mouth of the world, derived from  
the rocky breasts forever, flowing and drawn, and  
since our knowledge is historical, flowing, and  
flown.

Knowledge, one imagines, is all around, but at the same time it is an element in which one cannot live or even dip one’s limbs. Knowledge, furthermore, is inherently historical: a great stream of time that surrounds humankind, relative to an individual’s own precise situation.

The suggestion seems to be that knowledge, paralleled to this translucent and inviting—but, in fact, inhospitable—element, is ultimately unreachable.

The best one can do is live on the land, scraping the scales from fish that have been taken from this medium. One may imagine knowledge to flow all around, and in fact it is the font of those things

necessary for human sustenance. Yet at the same time one can never attain it; indeed, it is a medium too fine for such corporeal creatures as humans to experience directly.

## “QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL”

**First published:** 1965 (collected in *Questions of Travel*, 1965)

**Type of work:** Poem

*As a meditation taking a tropical scene as its point of departure, the poem comments on the merits and disadvantages of travel.*

“Questions of Travel” provided the title for Bishop’s third volume of poetry, and it comes from a group of works that were written in, and take as their theme, Brazil. The poem is at once a series of very precise observations and, obliquely, a meditation on movement in place that suggests movement in the imagination. The dichotomy that is thereby set up between mind and body comes perhaps from the French philosopher René Descartes and echoes earlier literary treatments of the question of travel in works by Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Marcel Proust.

In this poem, the narrator remains submerged, emerging only briefly in the pronoun “we” in the poem’s second group of lines and then again before the final, italicized section as “the traveller,” who (like Romantic poet John Keats’s Grecian urn) writes his or her own motto, on which neither the narrator nor the author comments further. The result is that the reader is left with the ambiguity of knowing merely that this is what the traveler thinks, without knowing whether this is what the reader is to think. As the final section consists largely of questions, it may be precisely these questions that are the final “answer.”

The poem’s first line situates the reader immediately in an alien place, identified only as “here.” All things are relative: From the narrator’s point of view, the streams seem to be waterfalls, but from the point of view of the streams (if one can imagine this) the mountains become far away and tiny. In the second section begin the questions: Is it better to think of there from here? Would it have been better to think of here



from there? Why do people travel? What, after all, are they looking for?

The ultimate decision of the poem seems to be for travel, enumerating as it does the strange, tiny details that can be perceived only outside the frames of one's normal life. The last of these details is the rain, which produces a silence during which "the traveller" writes the question which closes the poem: "Is it lack of imagination that makes us come/ to imagined places, not just stay at home?" Is there a point, that is, to physical displacement? Should one travel only in the mind? Is the imagination not better than reality? Though the poem ends on this question, Bishop's skill at evoking the details that precede it somehow suggests that travel in reality is better, or at least more interesting, than travel in imagination. Nevertheless, her vote remains somewhat hesitant, with the final image one of the person thinking of the inherent limitations of the human body: "Continent, city; country, society:/the choice is never wide and never free."

### "IN THE WAITING ROOM"

**First published:** 1976 (collected in *Geography III*, 1976)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet recalls a childhood epiphany in a dentist's waiting room.*

"In the Waiting Room" is a frequently anthologized poem which describes a moment of awakening consciousness in the poet's early life. The speaker sets the scene with Bishop's characteristic attention to minute detail. She has accompanied her Aunt Consuelo to the dentist's office and waits for her through the dark afternoon or evening of Massachusetts in February. While she waits, she reads a copy of *National Geographic*, observing the pictures of naked women, a dead man "slung on a pole," and a volcanic eruption. The pictures of the women both fascinate and horrify the child; she stares at their naked breasts and at the wire adornments binding their necks. At that moment, she hears her aunt's soft gasp from the dentist's office, and she is moved by a series of understandings. One is that somehow all of us are united—

the child viewer, the aunt, the women in the magazine. "I—we—were falling, falling. . . ." In fact, she feels everyone is falling off the world, and to stop that sense, she asserts her own identity. She is Elizabeth; she will be seven years old in three days. Still she is moved by the mystery of identity. Why should she be who she is? What binds her to her aunt, her family, the women in the picture? Why should the two of them be here at this particular moment? Bishop often writes about perceptions of time. Here, she pictures it as a black wave about to swallow the waiting room and all its inhabitants. As the poem ends, she feels restored to the ordinary order of things: the place, the time, herself—a February night in Worcester, Massachusetts, during the wartime, 1918.

### "THE MOOSE"

**First published:** 1976 (collected in *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*, 1983)

**Type of work:** Poem

*A bus travels across Nova Scotia into a forest, where its progress is stopped by a moose in the road.*

"The Moose" is a careful description of a bus journey through Nova Scotia. Its twenty-eight six-line stanzas employ an irregular pattern of slant rhyme which links two, sometimes four, end words in each stanza. Through most of the first half of the poem, the bus's journey is described in terms of the landscape that the bus traverses. The riders are scarcely mentioned at all. Instead, readers see the changing scenery. The bus moves from "narrow provinces/of fish and bread and tea" past the Bay of Fundy, with its enormous tides, and then past themudflats and the farmhouses and neat white churches. The battered old bus itself is not described until the fifth stanza. Stanzas six and seven picture the bus waiting for a passenger to say good-bye to the relatives he or she is leaving behind. Even the collie is noted here, and then the landscape reasserts itself in a description of flower gardens and little communities. In the thirteenth stanza, a woman enters the bus with some small fragments of conversation. At that point the bus is traveling by moonlight into the forest. The pas-

sengers fall asleep, and Bishop pictures them entering a world of dream filled with the comfortable voices of home and the details of daily life which, as the poet reminds her reader, also involves death. In the twenty-second stanza, the bus jolts to a stop, and the driver cuts the lights so that the passengers can look at a moose that has wandered into the road. Huge and homely and harmless, she sniffs at the bus while the passengers marvel and share a sudden sense of joy. Then the bus resumes its journey, leaving the moose on the dreamy moonlit road.

### “ONE ART”

**First published:** 1976 (collected in *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*, 1983)

**Type of work:** Poem

*In this ironic villanelle, the poet muses on learning the art of losing things.*

In “One Art,” Bishop, who was always interested in using formal techniques, uses the villanelle to give form to her thoughts on loss. The form requires that the first and third lines of the first stanza be used alternately as third-line refrains for the succeeding stanzas until the last stanza, which contains four lines, the last two of which repeat the refrain lines. As in this poem, the line length is commonly iambic pentameter, and the rhyme scheme for each triplet is *aba*. As with many writers of villanelles, Bishop alters some of the repeated lines instead of repeating precisely. Throughout much of the poem, her voice is flippant about the ease with which things get lost, things ranging from keys to time. In the fourth stanza, however, as she notes that she lost her mother’s watch and a loved house, she sounds less willing to accept the loss. In the fifth, she says that losing two cities and an entire continent (probably a reference to her leaving Brazil) still was not a disaster, although such losses sound enormous to the reader. The last stanza is often taken to refer to the suicide of Bishop’s Brazilian lover, Lota de Macedo Soares, the “you” the speaker says she has lost. However, when the speaker says that this shows that the art of losing is “not too hard to master,” her understatement suggests the opposite, as the poem concludes that the loss

“may look like (Write it!) like disaster.” The parenthetical “Write it!” suggests one way to cope with disastrous losses—through art.

### SUMMARY

Bishop carved a secure niche for herself in twentieth century poetry through the careful crafting of her few meticulously polished works. If some of her poems seem to evade involvement with the world in favor of a highly polished surface that will be most attractive to those who find refuge from action in words, others pose more centrally the very questions and problems that the more distant ones seem to avoid. Critics are united in their praise for her technique, and admiration for her understatement in an age of loudness continues to grow.

*Bruce E. Fleming; updated by Ann D. Garbett*

### DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Look at any of Elizabeth Bishop’s poems for evidence that she pays careful attention to detail. What sort of detail can you find?
- Some of Bishop’s poems, such as “The Moose” and “First Death in Nova Scotia,” draw on Canadian settings. What specifically Canadian details do you find in her work?
- How does Bishop portray time in her work?
- Bishop is sometimes seen as a writer who keeps a distance between herself and her reader. What evidence can you see of that in her poems?
- What stanza forms can you find in Bishop’s poems?
- What do Bishop’s poems reveal about her feelings about travel?
- What kinds of landscapes seem to have interested Bishop in her many descriptions of them?

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*Elizabeth Bishop*

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