

Davis Nguyen

Elizabeth Bishop was a well-known pioneer of the English language. From poetry to translations to prose, she touched every bit of it. She is respected around the world, including Nobelists Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, critics such as Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler and by poets all over (Vassar). Bishop received the Guggenheim Fellowship twice in 1947 and 1978, the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1956 and was the consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress in 1949 to 1950. Even though Bishop believed that she'd "written so little ...appalled by how bad some of the things [she'd] written actually are" the rest of the world could argue otherwise (McMahan pg ix).

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts on February 8, 1911, Elizabeth Bishop's childhood was not a pleasant one. Bishop's mother, Gertrude Boomer Bishop, was a nurse when she met William as a patient in a hospital. Her father, William Bishop, passed away in October 13 when she was only eight months old due to Bright's disease. Gertrude wore mourning clothes for five years which led to depression and eventually into a hallucinatory and violent mental illness. Bishop and her mother moved in with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia. Shortly afterwards, Gertrude developed a mental illness through a series of nervous breakdowns which first started in 1914 and caused her to be institutionalized at Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia in June 1916 when she became violent (Fountain). This would later prove to be the last time Bishop would see her mother who passed away in 1934. Despite such a tragic childhood, she was brought up by her grandparents who she would later idealize in her writings.

A year later, her paternal grandparents from Worcester had Bishop moved in with them. Elizabeth Bishop loathed living in Worcester and living with her grandparents got sick after a restless first night with them. When her grandfather issued an order, it would have been obeyed and in return, Bishop did not feel love in their affection to her but more of a sense of duty and obligation. She was lonely and suffered from physical and mental ailment living in Worcester. During her time there, Bishop was never a healthy child and was so weak that she could barely walk. One day, she was sent home from school after showing severe eczema sores on her skin. In addition to eczema, she also had asthma. Her time in Worcester was recollected in "Country Mouse". She was rescued by her mother's sister, Maud Shepherdson and moved to South Boston in 1918. Living with Maud and George Shepherdson, she started to regain her health even though she was often ill. For her early education, she attended public school, then boarding school, and spent summers at Nova Scotia with her grandparents and camp at Camp Chequesset on Cape Cod. In 1930, Bishop was admitted into Vassar College where she first initially thought to study music, Greek, and concentrated on literature. She often wished she was a painter which can be seen from her water color paintings and casual sketches.

In 1934, Bishop met her lifelong friend and mentor, Marianne Moore, on the front steps of Vassar library. From this relationship, three of Elizabeth Bishop's early poems were placed between two book covers for the first time ever in an anthology introduced by Moore, *Trial Balances*. In the same year, her mother passed away on May 29, 1934. In June, Bishop graduated from Vassar College. In 1937, she went on a fishing trip with her classmate, Louise Crane, in Florida where she soon discovered Key West. This was the place where she wrote "The Fish" and "The Bight".

At the start of the post-war period, just after World War Two, Bishop was rewarded the Houghton Mifflin Poetry Award in 1945 and following the next year, she published her first book, *North*

*and South*. From her book, she liked every part of it except for the cover. Around this time, she became friends with poet Robert Lowell and was living in New York City. Never happily living there, she drank heavily and reluctantly accepted the position of Consultant in Poetry in the Library of Congress with Lowell's assistance in 1950.

The next year, late in 1951, Bishop began a trip to South America stopping in Brazil to visit friends. While visiting acquaintances in Rio de Janeiro, she had a severely violent reaction to a cashew fruit that she was eating. Bishop was hospitalized and as a result, this delays her departure. While recovering from her allergic reaction, she met and fell in love with her friend who was nursing her, Maria Carlota Costallat de Macedo Soares (also known as Lota de Macedo Soares). Soares invited Bishop to live with her in Samambaia and in June of 1952, Elizabeth moved in with Soares.

Bishop loved the life-style in Samambaia, being in the country side, the rural people and the folk traditions. In addition to that, she was with her most profound love. During her stay in Brazil, she published her second book, *A Cold Spring*, in 1955. Her first two books was combined and published as *Poems: North & South – A Cold Spring*. During her stay with Soares, Bishop learned Portuguese well enough that she began to translate Brazilian poems and stories. Over the course of the next three years after *A Cold Spring*, she translated *The Diary of Helena Morley*, written by Alice Dayrell Calderia Brant.

From her time in Brazil, Bishop was able to enjoy life. In 1965, she published her third book, *Questions of Travel*. Much like her previous two books, this piece of work had the theme of a lonely childhood and detachment. On a lighter note, the other half of the book reflects her intimate relationship with Soares as the speaker has with the reader, but time in Brazil was getting worse. The country was going through a rough state with growing political and economic turmoil. President Joao Goulart was overthrown in 1964 and the country was being controlled by a succession of military governments as the struggle for power continues. Soares neighbor, Carlos Lacerda, was elected as governor and Soares proposed that she could change the landfill into a people's park. The project took a toll on Soares and Bishop's relationship since the project captured Soares attention as there was always opposition and resistance everywhere. As Soares continued on with the project, Bishop felt neglected and began drinking heavily again. She started an affair in Ouro Preto where she purchased a house. Soares found out and ended up miserable and fell ill as she had to deal with this emotional stress along with her project. Bishop also fell ill from drinking. Hoping to recover, Bishop planned to leave the country and moved to New York. Against the doctor's orders, Soares followed Bishop "afraid that Elizabeth was going away" (Fountain 200). Soon after reaching New York on September 19, 1967, Soares attempted suicide the same day by overdosing on tranquilizers. She passed away a week later in St. Vincent's Hospital on September 25, 1967.

After Soares's death, Bishop continued with her work and published *The Completed Poems* in 1969 and *Geography III* in 1976. In Soares's will, she divided her estate between Bishop and Mary Morse, the executor of the will. Morse inherited the house and land in Petropolis whereas Bishop was bequeathed the apartment along with seven offices in a building where Soares had invested in Rio. Soares's sister challenged the will proclaiming that Soares was not stable mentally when she signed the will. In addition to that, as being the closest kin to Soares, she felt that she should be the executor. Traveling back to Rio, Bishop felt that she was returning to protect her interests and properties in Brazil. She started to arrange for the sales of Soares's apartment and her offices while moving all of Soares's possession to Ouro Preto. While Bishop was in the area, she met with Decio de Sousa, Soares and

Bishop's psychiatrist where she learned that he insisted that Soares does not travel to New York to stay with Bishop. He portrayed Soares as running away from care just to be with Bishop. From this encounter, Bishop hoped that the meeting with her psychiatrist would clear up any misunderstanding about Soares's suicide. However, in Rio, things did not go too well for Bishop. She encountered people whom she knew in Rio who now appeared distant. In the end, became more and more cynical (fountain 234).

Feeling that there was nothing left for her in Brazil, Bishop moved to San Francisco with Suzanne Bowen. She lived with Bowen knowing that she should not live alone. Two years after living with Bowen, Robert Lowell invited her to Cambridge, Massachusetts to teach his course at Harvard while he was on leave (Fountain 237). While teaching at Harvard on and off, she met Alice Methfessel who would stand by Bishop for the rest of her life.

In October 6, 1979, at the age of sixty-eight, Elizabeth Bishop passed away due to a cerebral hemorrhage in her apartment at Lewis Wharf, Boston. She is buried in Hope Cemetery in Worcester with her epitaph is: "All the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful." from her poem, "The Bight". Growing up from a rough childhood, Bishop still manages to find love, happiness and the inspiration and strength to continue on writing. Even though she is gone from our world, her words still live on for centuries to come.