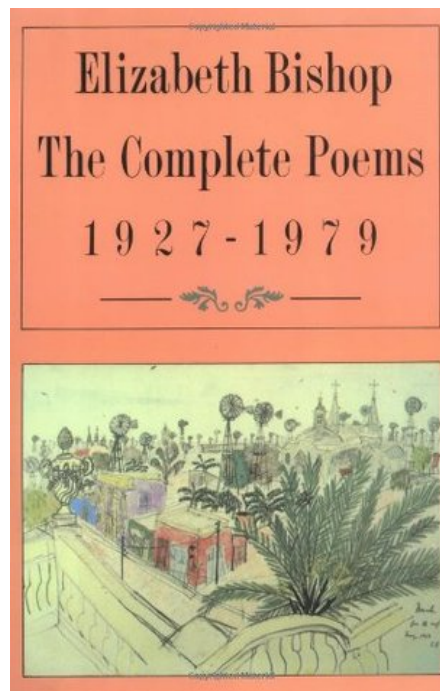




The Complete Poems 1927-1979

Elizabeth Bishop

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Elizabeth Bishop was vehement about her art--a perfectionist who didn't want to be seen as a "woman poet." In 1977, two years before her death she wrote, "art is art and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc., into two sexes is to emphasize values in them that are *not* art." She also deeply distrusted the dominant mode of modern poetry, one practiced with such detached passion by her friend Robert Lowell, the confessional.

Bishop was unforgiving of fashion and limited ways of seeing and feeling, but cast an even more trenchant eye on her own work. One wishes this volume were thicker, though the perfections within mark the rightness of her approach. The poems are sublimely controlled, fraught with word play, fierce moral vision (see her caustic ballad on Ezra Pound, "Visits to St. Elizabeths"), and reticence. From the surreal sorrow of the early "Man-Moth" (leaping off from a typo she had come across for "mammoth"), about a lonely monster who rarely emerges from "the pale subways of cement he calls his home," to the beauty of her villanelle "One Art" (with its repeated "the art of losing isn't hard to master"), the poet wittily explores distance and desolation, separation and sorrow.

The Complete Poems 1927-1979 Details

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Bryant says

In the May 14, 2009 issue of *The London Review of Books*, Colm Tóibín writes that in the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, "Description was a desperate way of avoiding self-description; looking at the world was a way of looking out from the self." He goes on to say that "The fact that the world was there was both enough and far too little for Bishop. Its history or her own history were beside the point." Given that the lyric mode† has become the dominant mode of contemporary poetry (as opposed to epic or didactic or pastoral modes), and given that contemporary lyric is often conceived as "overheard" or confessional poetry, Tóibín's contention is an interesting one. When we overhear Bishop, we don't hear her talking about herself. She's talking about fish or armadillos or moose. For a reader steeped in the patent egoism (and occasional egotism) of contemporary lyric poets like Louise Glück, Frederick Seidel, John Ashberry, or Jorrie Graham, Elizabeth Bishop cuts an odd figure. There seems to be not very much Elizabeth Bishop in the poems of Elizabeth Bishop. Biographical critics, meet your ultimate foe.

Yet reading this collection, which includes all published poems, unpublished poems from her youth, and a series of translations, one sees that Tóibín is not altogether right. Bishop's description was not a desperate way of "avoiding self-description"; it was in fact her very method of self-description. In fish and armadillos and moose she saw human characteristics that dissolved the boundaries we are wont to erect between human and animal. Observe how in "The Fish," Bishop struggles to reject the animal as something fully other:

I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
--if you could call it a lip--
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.

...

Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.

The narrator toggles between anthropomorphizing description ("his sullen face") and clinical, distant language ("the mechanism of his jaw"), correcting herself mid-stride ("if you could call it a lip," "or four and a wire leader"). This is a wonderful poem that transmutes the fish-out-of-water disorientation to the person who has caught the fish. She cannot make sense of it, categorize it, and when she tries, she wrestles with signs of noble struggle, even wisdom, and confirmations that it is a beast with eyes "shallower" and "yellowed" when compared with human eyes, eyes that don't "return my stare." It's wise and mundane, deep and shallow, all at once. In the final lines, the mystery of the fish overwhelms the narrator's sense of victory:

I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels--until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Surrendering the fish means surrendering her attempt to figure it out. Much of what I find stirring and delightful about Bishop's poetry is this surrendering posture, an angle of defeat that never fully lets on quite what it's up to. In more overt poems like "Questions of Travel," Bishop unabashedly poses a series of difficult questions that imply defeat, including the famous closing lines:

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there ... No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?

It is in the struggle for understanding that Bishop finds the vitality of the self. This reminds me of Louise Glück's poetry, but Bishop's feels less like therapeutic self-expression, and it is the better for it. For Bishop locates the turmoil between what she thinks she knows and what she cannot or does not know not only in her own head but also in heads of seemingly the weakest or most ridiculous creatures. In doing so, she suggests an identification between herself and vulnerable animals like the armadillo or the sandpiper. This identification has a way of both expanding the range of her conundrums--they afflict even weak animals--and reducing their self-importance--if even a sandpiper can have the view that "The world is mist. And then the world is / minute and vast and clear," how special is it that we can, too?

"Sandpiper" closes

he is preoccupied,

looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!
The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

This is Bishop, too. We find her looking for something, something, something, darting her head among the objects and mysteries of material life like a sandpiper flitting its head along the pebbled shore. Her collected poems prove that among the million grains she knows where the rose and amethyst lie.

†On the rise of the lyric mode in modern and contemporary poetry, see Michael Silk's important chapter "Lyric and Lyrics: Perspectives Ancient and Modern" in the *Cambridge Companion to Greek Lyric*, pp. 373ff. Silk ably demonstrates how privileging one mode of poetry, the lyric mode, reached such an extent that the mode itself is now synonymous with poetry.

Greg Fanoë says

This is my favorite poetry I've read in a long time. Somewhere in contention for my actual favorite, though I guess "The Waste Land" feels pretty unshakeable at the top slot there. "One Art" is her most famous and it is pretty lovely but totally unrepresentative of her work as a whole. It's not like I loved each and every poem here but there were enough great ones for this to get 5 stars for sure.

I mean look I'm a pretty easy grader on Goodreads but sometimes I've been tempted to go back and restrict 5 star ratings to only the true 10/10 classics (I tend to round up 9/10 books to 5 stars). In that universe, the only five star ratings I would have given out this year would be this book, "Zeno's Conscience" and "Arcadia" (in this universe I've given out 5 stars to 8/37 books I've read this year). Note I'll never actually do this cause I don't wanna go back and re-rate hundreds of books.

Lee Monks says

Better with every reading.

Sasha says

Elizabeth, I liked some of your poems, found some of them beautiful, or touching or delicately structured. Not especially profound, but you don't strike me as having invested much in the profound, rather the fleeting, the unintended and the suddenly honest. You also did not speak often of love, except perhaps in your manuscript poems, which you hid and which did not escape until after your death. So much for the love poems. They were some of your best, by the way-- if only you had been bolder about the sexy bits. So thank you for sharing your poetry, because I read it all-- within the space of 24 hours or so and I have learned (as least) one important thing: good poems are hard to come by, even from oneself. Perhaps especially so.

Peter Landau says

There's no denying Elizabeth Bishop's artistry. Her poems are polished to a blinding shine, which may be my problem with them. I had to turn away. Maybe it's her perfectionism. I'm more attracted to failure, or at least to rough edges. They give me a foothold. It wasn't until I was trying to wake up my five-year-old daughter earlier this week, and I happened to have this book in my hand, that I found an entry point. Or a weapon. I told my daughter I was going to read her poetry until she got out of bed. She didn't move and, true to my word, I recited some of Bishop's poems. Ada, my daughter, screamed. She clawed at her ears to stop the sound from entering her tired head. She kicked and squirmed as if in great pain, but eventually she got up. And I heard the music of the work that had beforehand eluded me. So, there's a pragmatic side to the poems that I'd recommend to any struggling parent.

Michael says

Oblique, bizarre, and brilliantly crafted, Bishop's poems offer slanted perspectives on a wide scope of subjects: nature, national history, endurance, travel, injustice, loss. The poet's work increases in complexity and ambition with each collection, though it defies easy categorization from the start. Bishop wrote in a distinctive style so unlike that of the most famous poets of her generation. Her poems care neither for emotional revelation nor experiments in syntax; instead, they quietly revel in playing with rhetoric and sound, mostly within the boundaries of conventional forms. There's nothing else quite like Bishop's poetry in English, making *The Complete Poems* worth reading at least once.

Roxanne says

I really wanted to like this collection. I did enjoy *One Art*:

One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

---Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

Sherry Chandler says

Bishop forces me to slow down and savor -- I don't always want to do that but when I do the rewards are great.

?Tash says

*into that world inverted
where left is always right,
where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me.*
- Insomnia

From my favorite poem

soulAdmitted says

Io ho delle serie resistenze riguardo al periodo ittico di Elizabeth Bishop.
Non so: “aria che sa di merluzzo” e raschiare scaglie e triglie, tovaglie e stoviglie (da pesce, presumibilmente).
Anche riguardo alla sua fase ornitologica sono ritrosissima. Un po’ come mi capita con il periodo botanico di Marianne Moore, per dire.
Niente. Rivoglio i pesci e i fiori di Sexton, Plath, Rich, Hacker. Con tutte le spine.

Juliana says

4,5 stars. I wrote about this book here: Questions of displacement - <http://wp.me/p79SOn-BT> #readwomen

Michael Arnold says

I love Elizabeth Bishop. I think she is fantastic.

This is an excellent book, and one I'm going to read again. In the first appendix to this has all of Bishop's manuscripts and unpublished poems, and like T.S. Eliot's unfinished poems in his Complete Poems put out by Faber and Faber, I must admit I find them interesting as a writer - seeing what better writers and poets have written and then rejected. It is an insight into how their mind worked during the creative process. And seeing the actual manuscripts along with a transcription in this book makes me feel closer to Bishop. I can just imagine her penning a quick poem on the back of a shopping list (as one of them is) and then forgetting about it, or typing up the manuscript before thinking it wasn't good enough. Anyone who writes can surely relate to that at least. But as a reader and admirer of Bishop, like the unfinished poems of Eliot, I don't find them as interesting somehow.

Elizabeth Bishop is, though, a fantastic poet. In a sense, she is like someone trying to pick up Frost's ideas and failed. She used free verse where he used formal verse, and as the back of the book states, a lot of Bishop's poems are about Order trying and failing to control Disorder, and that has influenced (I'm sure)

Bishop's use of free verse.

She was perfectly capable of more traditional forms, but to Bishop it doesn't mean the same as it did to Frost. Frost was I guess in this sense more hopeful than Bishop, in the power of verse to embody living. That's the only way Frost was more of an optimist than Bishop though, Frost was BLEAK. Bishop, on the other hand, was much more optimistic about her subjects, and also much more happy and well-adjusted.

The sun of Florida and South America shines through in Bishop's work, and the images she leaves the reader with are startling and beautiful in a more celebratory way. In both Bishop and Frost everyone is working to survive, but unlike Frost's, Bishop's characters never complain about it. Her, and her characters, enjoy life for what it is - the melancholy of a poem like 'The Wood Pile', 'Home Burial' or 'Death of a Hired Man' (for some reason, all I can think about at the moment is North of Boston) just is not found here. Instead what's found is 'Filling Station' and 'The Fish'. Read them yourself and you'll understand what I mean.

Ffiamma says

"i lost two cities, lovely ones. and, vaster,
some realms i owned, two rivers, a continent.
i miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.
- even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
i love) i shan't have lied. it's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (write it!) like disaster"

Neira says

To be fair I've only read a handful of poems but I've really enjoyed them, Bishop is exquisitely evocative and poetic without being puzzling.

David M says

The brown enormous odor he lived by
was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,
for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.
Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts,
the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare--
even to the sow that always ate her young--
till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.
But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts
(he hid the pints behind the two-by-fours),
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.
And then he thought he almost might endure
his exile yet another year or more.

But evenings the first star came to warn.
The farmer whom he worked for came at dark
to shut the cows and horses in the barn
beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,
with pitchforks, faint forked lightnings, catching light,
safe and companionable as in the Ark.
The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.
The lantern--like the sun, going away--
laid on the mud a pacing aureole.
Carrying a bucket along a slimy board,
he felt the bats' uncertain staggering flight,
his shuddering insights, beyond his control,
touching him. But it took him a long time
finally to make up his mind to go home.

Jenna says

Very few Bishop poems touch overtly on the subject of romantic love. The following poem does, and it tugs on one's heartstrings as deftly as any Lucinda Williams country song:

"Insomnia"

The moon in the bureau mirror
looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, at herself,
but she never, never smiles)
far and away beyond sleep, or
perhaps she's a daytime sleeper.

By the Universe deserted,
SHE'd tell it to go to hell,
and she'd find a body of water,
or a mirror, on which to dwell.
So wrap up care in a cobweb
and drop it down the well

into that world inverted
where left is always right,
where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me.

At the other end of the spectrum, Bishop's poem "Pink Dog" stands out as a stomach-turningly potent piece of social commentary. It appears that this woman excelled at virtually every form and genre of poetry.

Fergus says

The carefully-wrought imagery of an American Master, brimming with controlled emotion:

IMAGINARY ICEBERGS

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,
although it meant the end of travel.
Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock
and all the sea were moving marble.

Icebergs behoove the soul
(both being self-made from elements least visible)
to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.

kenneth says

Nearly all of these poems are remarkable in some way. Bishop deftly handles fixed forms, such as the sonnet and the sestina, and her villanelle "One Art" has been lingering in my mind for awhile. Her verses in open form are well chiseled sculptures. She can shift her creative focus from the quotidian to the marvelous and leave the reader the better for it.

Some more favorites include "The Hanging of the Mouse" and "Roosters".

Also notable are her translations of other poets, including "The Table" and "Don't Kill Yourself" by Carlos Drummond de Andrade.

Jonfaith says

Think of the long trip home.

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?

That very thought has occurred to me on occasion. This collection was a slow start. The images were dense, looped and anchored in rocky soil. There was a trace of fear upon entry: a hesitation. Perhaps there was a benefit; I know nothing about Bishop's biography, though I'm guessing there were extensive travels to Brazil. It was Teju Cole who pointed the way. He has proved a reliable curator.

Alan says

I cannot be objective: Bishop was a friend since HS, throughout the Vassar College years and beyond, of my mentor and patron Rhoda Sheehan; in fact, Bishop rented Rhoda's "Hurricane House" that floated over Westport Harbor in the '38 hurricane. That's where I met her once, individually, and asked her about

prosody. I never realized until I read a Bishop biography, maybe Remembering Elizabeth Bishop, how much effort Rhoda must have put into getting Bishop to talk to me. She dreaded students, even when she was fairly remunerated out at U WA when she took over a year or two for Roethke.

Fairly remunerated she was not by my humble Bristol Community College, where she gave readings three years in a row in the late 70s, when she'd come back from Brazil--and when her longtime Brazilian friend committed suicide. One of those "readings" she played and discussed sambas--how everyone in Brazil wrote them, the janitor, the poet laureate. She played a few on an old 78 phonograph, to an audience of perhaps 25, while our community college students on break from class were in the next "room" (divided by a supposed wall, movable) playing rock on 6' speakers by their pool table. I recall thinking at the time: One major trouble with modern life is that the wrong people (and interests) have the best megaphones and speakers. Since Rhoda was her friend, Bishop came to talk for a Department outlay of \$100, too low for administrators to care about the event. A decade earlier we had had Ginsberg and even WH Auden (then priced at \$3500) to read. By the late 80s, no administrator knew the distinguished history of our poetry readings, and when they came up with \$1500 inflated dollars to invite a Pawtucket poet (with some name, yes), they bragged about "our first prominent poetry reading." We had also, in the 80s, had Marge Piercy from the Cape, and I would invite several including Alan Dugan.

I think Bishop is the Dickinson of my lifetime: low, under the radar of fame and celebration until quite late in her life, though always known to the best editors and people like Roethke. Bishop tinkered with her great vilanelle "One Art" for years at Rhoda Sheehan's Hurricane House--perhaps the central achievement of Westport in verse, though we have housed in summers distinguished pros and critics galore, including from the New Yorker and the NYT.

Bishop's colloquialism is deceptive, appearing casual but in fact finely honed. Still, I do not find her poems easy to remember and recite, except "One Art." "The art of losing isn't hard to master..."

But as with any great poet, there are lines throughout that pop out when re-read. Last night we had tremendous thunder storms in the wake of the devastating tornadoes a couple weeks ago in Oklahoma. Bishop has it, "Personal and spiteful as a neighbor's child,/ thunder began to bang and bump the roof" (Electrical Storm).

Well, I did not know enough to learn much from her when I met her, though I learned lots every time she read at my college, but I can boast this: I cleaned a fish--a Bluefish-- for the author of The Fish, for her and her friends including Alice.