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Elizabeth Bishop
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April is National Poetry Month, and over the years we have held an annual poetry service using a few different formats. This year, rather than selecting a theme and then reading many different poems by various poets on that theme, we are experimenting with a focus on a specific poet. Individual poems can certainly be moving and meaningful without knowing anything about the author, but knowing more about a poet's life and background can give the entirety of their work more complex and intricate dimensions. And if we continue with this format, I look forward to sharing with you in the future about the life and poetry of Walt Whitman, Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Czesław Miłosz, Audre Lorde, Langston Hughes, and many more.

For today, however, our focus is on one of America's most beloved twentieth-century poets, Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979). The main reason I chose to start with her is that Megan Marshall published a biography of Bishop last year. And I'm typically interested in reading about anyone Marshall writes about. Those of you who have been around here a few years may recall that I have preached two previous sermons inspired by Megan Marshall biographies. The first was Margaret Fuller: A New American Life. When I learned that a biography about a Unitarian woman from the nineteenth-century had won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in the category of Biography or Autobiography, I was intrigued. The other was Marshall's The Peabody Sisters, a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize, which was about three more incredible Unitarian women from the nineteenth century. Although Elizabeth Bishop was not a Unitarian, when I was discerning which

poet to focus on for this year, I knew Megan Marshall would not lead me astray.

And as I began to learn more about Bishop, it was a bonus of sorts to learn that she approved fewer than ninety of her poems for publication during her lifetime (Cook 2). Unlike some poets whose collected works are gigantic tomes, there was an appeal in knowing that I could certainly read Elizabeth Bishop's entire catalogue in preparation for this sermon. Although she lived to be 68 and was a working poet for decades, she published so few poems primarily because she demanded an extremely high standard of herself. She wrote of being determined **"never to try to publish anything until I thought I'd done my best with it, no matter how many years it took—or never to publish at all"** (Bishop xii).

(Full disclosure: I'm not necessarily recommending Bishop's approach. Indeed, I try to encourage myself most often to "Ship your art," as the saying goes—meaning, to err on the side of getting your work out into the world, rather than allowing the perfect to be the enemy of the good. At the same time, I can respect that her legacy is eighty-something poems that met her personal high bar of approval.)

So although Bishop only published approximately ninety poems in her lifetime, what she lacked in quantity, she more than made up for in quality. Indeed, it was also said—presumably with some jealousy—that, "Never has so little work dragged in so many prizes (Marshall 116). But behind each of her poems lay an immense amount of focus, care, and revision. As Eleanor Cook writes about in her book Elizabeth Bishop at Work (Harvard University Press, 2016), Bishop's poems have been described as **"small worlds, evoking a time, a place, an ambience…packed with implication and intimation, packed so easily and quietly that their richness could be overlooked"** (Cook 1). Thankfully, her work met with many close readers. And to name only a few of the prestigious awards she received: she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1956, the National Book Award for Poetry in 1970, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977.

But now I'm getting ahead of myself. To turn back the clock and share with you some of how she arrived at that point, Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts (Marshall 7). Tragically, however, loss came early in her life. Her father had a chronic, incurable inflammation of his kidneys that in the early twentieth-century

was the fourth leading cause of death in the United States. As a last ditch attempt to care for her father's health, when Elizabeth was four months old, both her mother and father went away for three months, leaving her in the care of family members. But this last vacation was not enough, and her father died when she was eight months old (9).

The grief and stress in the wake of her father's death also exacerbated underlying conditions with her mother's mental health. She was sometimes physically abusive to young Elizabeth and other times would leave for weeks or months at a time (10-11). Elizabeth eventually came to view her mother more as one of her aunts (12). And over time, her mother was institutionalized for increasing lengths of times until she eventually lived in an institution for the rest of her life. Her mother died in 1934, two weeks before Elizabeth's graduation for Vassar College (45).

In the wake of these early tragedies, it was in some sense her family and friends who saved her, but writing poetry was also her lifelong tool of survival, perseverance, and resilience. She began writing poems at age eight and benefited from the constructive editing advice of her Aunt Grace. Elizabeth's first pay as a writer came at age twelve when her essay on "Americanism" won a five-dollar gold piece in an American Legion contest (19). She also spent a lot of time as a child memorizing famous poems (20).

Another significant aspect of Bishop's life is that although she never joined the cause of sexual liberation or identified herself publicly as a Lesbian, she was clear from a young age that, "She simply loved the people she loved, and mostly they were women or girls of her own age" (24, 50).

It was also widely known that Bishop drank heavily. And at least part of that was in response to the discrimination against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender citizens of this country throughout her adult life. To name one among many examples, her tenure from 1949 to 1950 as United States Poet Laureate (known then as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress), was in the middle of a ten-year period in which six thousand federal employees were fired for being homosexuals in a so-called "morality and decency" crusade that was "nearly as visible as the concurrent hunt for Communist Party members and sympathizers (85-86). As a result, Bishop never described Alice Methfessel "to others as anything but 'friend'—not as 'lover' or 'partner,'

words that might have begun to seem right had Elizabeth lived a decade longer" (2).

Relatedly, the final two decades of her life were during the height of second-wave feminism, which began in the early 1960s, and although she was supportive of women's equality, she was resistant to some trends in women's liberation. In particular, she did not want to be known as "the first woman poet to teach creative writing at Harvard, or as a *woman* poet at all." She wanted to be known as a great poet—*period* (246-247).

And although she was a famous poet, there was no convincing the dean at Harvard to make an exception and allow her to keep teaching after "the spring of 1977 when she turned sixty-six, passing the mandatory retirement age for nontenured faculty members" (2). Perhaps part of the reason was that:

> Elizabeth had been a diffident teacher of "creative writing," another phrase she despised, along with the trendy term "creativity," and her literature seminars attracted only a handful of students each year. Many were scared off by her requirement to memorize poetry each week…. This was the 'age of poet-teachers,' but Elizabeth wasn't one of them. Her poetic gift had come to her early in a time of need, and she had nurtured it, as it had nurtured her, not in the classroom but in solitude—in libraries and apartments in New York City, in rented rooms and a white house in Key West, in an *estudio* in Brazil… How could she advise students to do otherwise? (280-281)

But what she did leave behind was the legacy of her poetry.

In the end, "Bishop died quite suddenly and unexpectedly of a cerebral aneurysm on October 6, 1979," She was sixty-eight. She had been "preparing to go out for dinner and had been occupied with her usual tasks throughout the day. She wrote a letter about footnotes to poems, for example, earlier that day. Her friends and colleagues were shocked, but arranged for a memorial service at Harvard later that month to celebrate her life (Cook 263)

In that spirit, I will end with this passage from near the end of Megan Marshall's biography of Bishop:

> Even if her writing had not shaken the world, or so far claimed a wide readership, **writing had always saved her**. "What we seem to want in

art," she [once said], "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?) 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. (297)