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**Harvard Square as it was, 1962**

**Building Old Cambridge,** by Susan E. Maycock and Charles M. Sullivan, M.C.P. '70 (MIT, $49.95). From the Cambridge Historical Commission's survey director and executive director comes a massive, absorbing, and enthrallingly illustrated volume on the community's evolution—full of enlightenments even before chapter 10, on the "Development of Harvard University."

Matters strategic: **The Imagineers of War,** by Sharon Weinberger, RI '16 (Knopf, $30), is a comprehensive account of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—the folks who brought you the Internet, drones, and self-driving-car technology, plus some terrible ideas, some of them unfortunately implemented. **The Chessboard and the Web,** by Anne-Marie Slaughter, J.D. '85 (Yale, $26), lays out the case for moving beyond a chess image of international relations (the United States vs. Iran, say) toward a "playbook for strategies of connection" (U.S. interest in Syria not as a strategic concern itself, but as a destabilizing source of refugees); it would be interesting to see that applied to coming trade confrontations with China. The U.S. negotiators might want to pack **The Girl at the Baggage Claim: Explaining the East-West Culture Gap,** by Gish Jen '77, RI '02 (Knopf, $26.95), who turns from fiction to cultural analysis to sort out the roots of "so much of what mystifies us"—needlessly—"about the East."

ended with a performance of their finished musical works by a professional chorus, the Antioch Chamber Ensemble. (He is mentoring a new group this spring.) He also led a workshop for Radcliffe Choral Society and Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum members that culminated with the creation of "In the Name of Music," which was premiered in November at Sanders Theatre. "I wanted to engage the singers in the process of writing the text, so that they would ultimately be singing about a theme that deeply concerns them," Kyr says. When he asked them what issues concerned them most, their answers had a common thread: the transformative power of music.

It's a common thread for him, too. He sees music as a form of storytelling. At the end of a long interview comes a reference to Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," a soaring, opera-like oratorio. "For me," he says, "it expresses how each member of the human family experiences the suffering of the passion in his or her own way, regardless of one's faith background." The story Bach was telling was one with human resonance: suffering and loss, decisions that relate to our own life and death. "Bach takes us on the journey of the passion, which reflects our personal relationship to suffering, and ultimately, the triumph of life over death."

# Holding Emotion "At an Observer's Distance"

*Elizabeth Bishop's enduring privacy*

*by* ADAM KIRSCH

By the time Elizabeth Bishop began to teach at Harvard, in 1970, she was nearing the end of an exceptionally brilliant career in American poetry. Though she published little—just four collections, a total of about 100 poems—her work earned the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She was regarded as a master by poets as different as Marianne Moore, her early mentor, and Robert Lowell '39, her close friend and longtime correspondent. It was Lowell who brought Bishop to Harvard, to take over his creative writing classes while he lived in England (see "The Brahmin Rebel," May-June 2004, page 39). But while Bishop belonged to the first generation of American poets to make their living in the academy, she herself had spent almost no time in the classroom, and she didn't feel at home there. Neither her reserved personality nor her extremely high standards made her a natural teacher, and the enrollment in her classes was usually small. Megan Marshall '77, RI '07, who took Bishop's class in 1976, recalls that the great poet often wore "a pained look": "Miss Bishop really did seem to wish she wasn't there."

If Bishop had known that, 40 years later, Marshall would write a biography—*Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast*—she would probably have been still less enthusiastic. Bishop belonged to a poetic generation that revealed more about itself in verse than any earlier poets had thought possible, or necessary. "Confessional" poetry, as the school of Lowell and Anne Sexton came to be known, delighted in putting as much fact as possible on the page, especially facts that were painful or shameful. "Yet why not say what happened?" Lowell asked in his poem "Epilogue," and so he did—writing about his childhood,

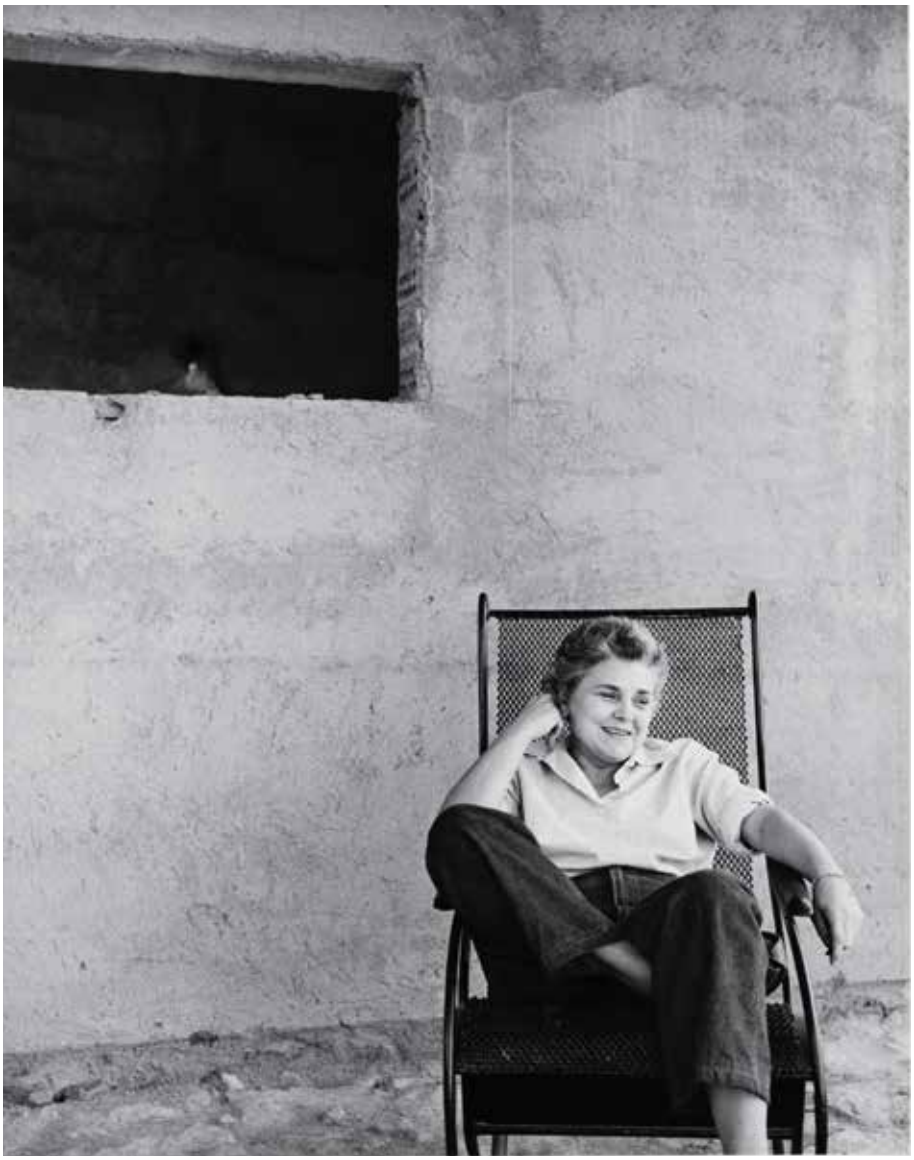
*Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast,* by Megan Marshall (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, $30)

his parents' marriage, his own divorce.

Yet in this way, too, Bishop was an exception. Marshall quotes a letter in which Bishop wishes that she could be like all those other poets who "drink worse than I do, at least badly & all the time, and don't seem to have any regrets or shame—just write poems about it." But what she derisively called "the School of Anguish" was not for her; and even though she was closely acquainted with anguish, as Marshall shows, little about her life can be deduced from her poetic work. Her method was, rather, to hold emotion at an observer's distance, lodging intense feeling in things—objects, landscapes, animals—that could be seen and described. The titles of her poems are often just nouns: "The Map," "The Moose," "The Fish."

Only by attending closely to the powerful tension of Bishop's language does the reader grasp how much is at stake in these descriptions. One of her most famous poems, "At the Fishhouses," starts out as a kind of genre picture: an old fisherman mending nets, the "steeply peaked roofs" of the houses. But the poet's attention keeps getting drawn back to the water, which she describes as "Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,/element bearable to no mortal." In the poem's climax, Bishop fantasizes about what it would be like to touch and taste this deadly sea. To call this a poem about suicide would be too blunt; but there is no doubt that the poet's dread and longing for the water is what provides the emotional logic and force.

Bishop is a poet who holds the reader at arm's length, the better to communicate what really matters. And this reticence, as often happens, has provoked an intense desire for intimacy on the part of many readers.



**Elizabeth Bishop: the poet at ease, in 1954**

Indeed, right now there may be no American poet more beloved than Bishop. In the 1970s, it was Lowell—with his stormy personal life, political commitments, and vivid public persona—who was the star poet at Harvard and beyond. Forty years later, there is no doubt that Bishop is the more famous of the two. Though it may be too much for Marshall to say that Lowell is "comparatively forgotten," Bishop is the one today's students wish they had the chance to study with.

This feeling of attachment, even possessiveness, is what animates Marshall's biography, for both good and ill. "I was falling in love, too, with the Elizabeth Bishop I began to know in her letters and manuscript drafts and snapshots," Marshall writes when she describes her work on the book. Loving your subject is surely better than hating her, as many biographers seem to end up doing; but in literature as in life, love is not the emotion most conducive to clarity or understanding.

This is especially true with a subject like Bishop, who had such complicated feelings about intimacy—a legacy of her tragic, nearly ruinous childhood. She was born to a prosperous couple in Massachusetts in 1911, but her father died before she was a year old, and just a few years later her mother was committed to an insane asylum. A small trust fund ensured that Bishop would never be destitute—and spared her the need to work for much of her adult life—but she spent her childhood being bounced from relative to relative, between Nova Scotia and the Boston suburbs. Marshall sheds new light on this formative period in the poet's life, thanks to the discovery of a group of letters that was unavailable to previous scholars. In one letter, Bishop wrote to her psychoanalyst about having been abused by her uncle, who on one occasion dangled her by her hair out of a second-story window.

No wonder Bishop was so glad to escape to school, and then to Vassar, where she made close friends and fell in (unrequited) love with her roommate, Margaret Miller. By the time she graduated, she knew her ambition was to be a poet; but in a sense, she suffered from the lack of obstacles in her way. Dylan Thomas once observed that a poet can only write poetry for two hours a day, and the rest of the time he must either work or get into trouble. Bishop, like Thomas, ended up filling much of the empty time with alcohol. After all, she had no family ties, no need to earn a living, no reason to

Marshall writes with most psychological insight about the last 15 years of Bishop's life.

live here rather than there. This weightlessness is one explanation for the central role that travel would play in Bishop's imagination, as early as her 1935 poem "The Map":

> The names of seashore towns run
> out to sea,
> the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
> —the printer here experiencing the same excitement
> as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.

Marshall does not dramatically revise our sense of the outline of Bishop's biography. She lived in New York, then in Key West with her wealthy classmate Louise Crane, and then, starting in 1952, in Brazil, where she met the great love of her life, the aristocratic Lota de Macedo Soares. Marshall uses the surviving correspondence to shed light on the collapse of that relationship in the mid 1960s—in large part because of Bishop's alcoholism, which took a terrible toll on both women. In general, Marshall writes with most detail and psychological insight about the last 15 years of Bishop's life, before her death in 1979. This is due to the nature of the surviving papers, and also the availability of witnesses to interview. But beyond Bishop's romantic relationships, there is little incident to report, since she led a private life centered on the most private of acts, writing poems.

Marshall's relationship to Bishop as a subject is complicated by the fact that she was once her student. We know this because she has decided to alternate sections of narrative about Bishop's life with sections of autobiographical reminiscence, describing her own emotions and difficulties as a young woman in the mid 1970s. In particular, she writes about an episode, trivial in itself but clearly of great importance to her, in which she submitted a poem to Bishop which she had previously workshopped in another class. Since this was against Bishop's policy, she lowered Marshall's grade. To Marshall, this seemed like a terrible thing: "a feeling of shame, edged with anger,...burned so that I couldn't think," she writes. (In the end, Marshall stopped writing poetry, turning instead to a very successful career as a biographer; in 2014 she received the Pulitzer Prize for her life of Margaret Fuller.)

It is not clear what this material is doing in the book, except to establish Marshall's long-standing investment in her subject. But the illusion of intimacy that Marshall creates—and reinforces by referring to her subject always by her first name, as though Bishop were her and our friend—does not help us understand the poet any better. In a sense, too, the lack of interest the reader feels in Marshall's youthful difficulties undermines the interest of Bishop's travails, as well. It is not the little dramas of life that make a poet great, but what she makes out of them; and this is what biography can never explain.

*Contributing editor Adam Kirsch '97 is the author, most recently, of* The People and the Books: 18 Classics of Jewish Literature.