



One Art

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ONE ART, the selected letters of poet Elizabeth Bishop, is a major literary event. Bishop's pared-down sense of craft allowed few of the facts of her personal life to surface in her work. With her astounding ear and refined eye, details in her poetry speak volumes without necessarily revealing the events or even the major characters that inspired her writing. Bishop's particularized sensibility lures readers to want to know more about her. Now, with Robert Giroux's generous selection of more than five hundred letters, a full portrait of the poet emerges.

Bishop enjoyed the respect of the best writers of her time, most of whom became her intimate friends. The letters track Marianne Moore's involvement in Bishop's early poetry up until their well-known disagreement over the structure and colloquialism of the poem "Roosters." Although the two remained close friends for life, Bishop's rejection of Moore's suggestions was a critical moment marking the maturity of the younger poet. Robert Lowell and Bishop shared an intense creative interchange despite Lowell's intermittently manic bouts of skewed intimacy.

Bishop's relationship with a Brazilian woman—city planner Lota de Macedo Soares—was the central event of her life, lasting fifteen years. Their partnership ended with Lota's suicide, an event from which Bishop herself never recovered. Bishop's years in Brazil provided a fantastic, other-worldly experience for the Nova Scotian-born poet, offering exotic flora and fauna that could be described in awed detail in letters to a perfect audience: Marianne Moore. Brazil also offered Bishop a place to hide from the oppressive literary responsibilities which had begun to overwhelm her in the United States, as well as a safely obscure location in which to have her first full-fledged lesbian relationship.

After Lota's death and Bishop's return to America, the letters track Bishop's reluctant assumption of the responsibilities of literary celebrity as well as her struggles to remain cheerful despite battles with ill health. Casual, intimate and sprawling, ONE ART chronicles the everyday observations which inspired Bishop's tightly knit poetic precision and fully humanizes the work of this master poet.

Sources for Further Study

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