

# Dear Elizabeth



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## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

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Originally from Chicago, Sarah Ruhl received her M.F.A. from Brown University where she studied with Paula Vogel. Her plays have been produced on Broadway at the Lyceum by Lincoln Center Theater, Off-Broadway at Playwrights' Horizons, Second Stage, and at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse Theater, and regionally all over the country, with premieres often at Yale Repertory Theater, the Goodman Theater, Berkeley Repertory Theater, and the Piven Theatre Workshop in Chicago. Her plays have also been produced internationally and have been translated into over twelve languages. An alum of 13P and New Dramatists, she won a MacArthur Fellowship in 2006 and the Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award. She was the recipient of the PEN Center Award for a mid-career playwright, the Whiting Writers award, the Feminist Press' Forty under Forty award, and a Lilly Award. She served on the executive council of the Dramatist's Guild for three years and is currently on the faculty at Yale School of Drama. Her book of essays on the theater and motherhood, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*, was a Times Notable Book of the Year.

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## MEET THE POETS

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### ELIZABETH BISHOP

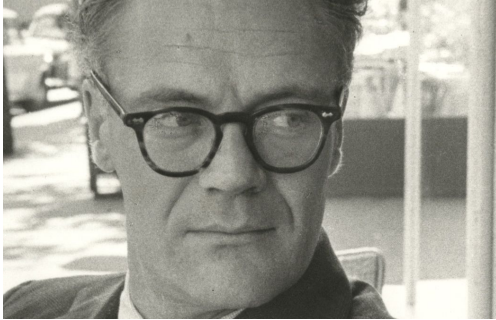


Elizabeth Bishop was an American poet and short-story writer. Born in 1911 in Massachusetts, she was raised primarily there and in Nova Scotia. She was Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1949 to 1950, the Pulitzer Prize-winner for Poetry in 1956, the National Book Award-winner in 1970, and the recipient of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1976. She died in Boston in 1979. She is considered one of the finest poets of the 20th century.

Bishop was a perfectionist who did not write prolifically. She published only 101 poems during her lifetime. According to the Poetry Foundation, "Her verse is marked by precise descriptions of the physical world and an air of

poetic serenity, but her underlying themes include the struggle to find a sense of belonging, and the human experiences of grief and longing.”

## ROBERT LOWELL



Robert Lowell was an American poet. He was born in Boston in 1917 and died in New York in 1977. The Lowells were a Boston Brahmin family who could trace their lineage to the Mayflower. He was appointed the sixth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, where he served from 1947 to 1948. In addition to winning the National Book Award, he won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1947 and 1974, the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, and a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1947. He is widely considered one of the most important

American poets of the postwar era. His biographer Paul Mariani called him "the poet-historian of our time" and "the last of [America's] influential public poets."

According to the Poetry Foundation—and unlike Bishop—Lowell was a prolific writer whose “true greatness as an American poet lies in the astonishing variety of his work. In the 1940s he wrote intricate and tightly patterned poems that incorporated traditional meter and rhyme; in the late 1950s when he published *Life Studies*, he began to write startlingly original personal or ‘confessional’ poetry in much looser forms and meters; in the 1960s he wrote increasingly public poetry; and finally in the 1970s he created poems that incorporated and extended elements of all the earlier poetry.”

Lowell stated, "The poets who most directly influenced me...were Allen Tate, Elizabeth Bishop, and William Carlos Williams. An unlikely combination! ... but you can see that Bishop is a sort of bridge between Tate's formalism and Williams's informal art."

## THEIR CORRESPONDENCE & FRIENDSHIP

Elizabeth Bishop was introduced to Robert Lowell by Randall Jarrell in 1947, and they became great friends, mostly through their written correspondence, until Lowell's death in 1977. After his death, she wrote, "our friendship, often kept alive through years of separation only by letters, remained constant and affectionate, and I shall always be deeply grateful for it."

They also influenced each other's poetry. Lowell cited Bishop's influence on his poem *Skunk Hour* which he said, “[was] modeled on Miss Bishop's ‘The Armadillo.’” Also, his poem “The Scream” is “derived from...Bishop's story ‘In the Village.’” “North Haven,” one of the last poems Bishop published during her lifetime, was written in memory of Lowell in 1978.

Bishop and Lowell’s friendship was unique. The poets rarely saw each other in person but rather wrote hundreds of letters throughout the decades they knew each other. This form of communication allowed them a degree of freedom in their writing to each other and each was able to open up about their poetry and their lives. The two shared a mutual respect and appreciation for each other’s writings and bonded over the connection they saw between personal suffering and art, having experienced trauma in their lives. Lowell’s overbearing mother was a cold, frustrated woman, consumed by anger. Lowell was

politically involved, imprisoned as a conscientious objector during the Second World War, and his personal life was full of marital and psychological turmoil. He suffered severe episodes of manic depression, for which he was repeatedly hospitalized. Bishop's father died when she was eight months old, and her mother became mentally ill and was admitted to a mental hospital when Bishop was 5, where she lived for nearly 20 years. Bishop never saw her again. Bishop was an alcoholic, prone to drinking binges, and a lesbian in an age when it was difficult to come out, who experienced the suicide of a long-term partner.

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## TRAVEL

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*"All my life I have lived and behaved very much like the sandpiper – just running down the edges of different countries and continents, 'looking for something'." – Elizabeth Bishop*

Bishop and Lowell traveled and lived in many locations across the globe. Yaddo, Key West, Maine, and Brazil, in particular, make appearances in *Dear Elizabeth*.

Yaddo: Yaddo was the country estate of financier Spencer Trask and his wife Katrina, a writer. The Trasks bequeathed their fortune and estate to the establishment of a residency program for artists. They founded the Corporation of Yaddo in 1900. In their letter of intent, they expressed the hope that Yaddo be a place of "rest and refreshment [for] authors, painters, sculptors, musicians and other artists both men and women, few in number but chosen for their creative gifts." Yaddo opened its doors to its first group of guests in 1926. Collectively, Yaddo artists have won 74 Pulitzer Prizes, 29 MacArthur Fellowships, 68 National Book Awards, and a Nobel Prize (Saul Bellow, who won the Nobel for Literature in 1976). Notable Yaddo artists through the turn of the millennium include James Baldwin, Leonard Bernstein, Truman Capote, Aaron Copland, Philip Guston, Patricia Highsmith, Langston Hughes, Ted Hughes, Jacob Lawrence, Sylvia Plath, Martin Puryear, Katherine Anne Porter, Amy Sillman, Clyfford Still, and David Foster Wallace. More recent guests include Terry Adkins, Laurie Anderson, Jeffrey Eugenides, Sheri Fink, and Matthew Weiner.

Key West: Long before the overseas highway connected it to the mainland and cruise ships made it a regular port of call, Key West was a tropical frontier town. Populated in the early twentieth century by an eclectic mix of fishermen, spongers, rum runners, and cigar makers, the tiny island was more Caribbean than American. Over 100 miles from mainland Florida and the southernmost point in the United States, Key West has attracted numerous artists and writers, including Ernest Hemingway, Wallace Stevens, Ralph Ellison, Tennessee Williams, Robert Frost, James Merrill, and, of course, Elizabeth Bishop. Bishop came to the island in the 1930s. In a letter to Marianne Moore, Bishop describes her surroundings: "I have one Key West story that I must tell you. It is more like the place than anything I can think of. The other day I went to the china closet to get a little white bowl to put some flowers in and when I was rinsing it I noticed some little black specks. I said to Mrs. Almyda, 'I think we must have mice' – but she took the bowl over to the light and studied it and after a while she said, 'No, them's lizard.'"

Brazil: In 1951 Bishop took what was supposed to be a brief voyage to Brazil. However, while there, she became very ill and stayed through a long recovery. While in Brazil, Bishop met and fell in love with Lota de Macedo Soares, an architect from a prominent Brazilian family, and they moved in together. Soares gave Bishop entrée to the highest political and artistic circles. In the twentieth century, no foreign visitor of similar rank was as well-placed, or stayed as long (fifteen years) as Bishop. As a result, she was influenced by the culture, climate, and politics of the region, and Brazil featured prominently in her work.

Maine: Elizabeth Bishop spent several of the last summers of her life in North Haven, one of the dozens of tiny islands that fleck Penobscot Bay, about halfway up the coast of Maine. While Bishop was well known as an eager traveler who wrote of distant, tropical locations and lived for many years as an expat in Brazil, she was also an aficionado of her native landscape and climate. North Haven lies about halfway between Boston, where Bishop lived, and Nova Scotia, one of her childhood homes. Bishop and Lowell spent a mysterious but emotionally momentous day in Stonington, Maine (a neighboring island to North Haven) in the summer of 1948. They talked, they went swimming: Lowell decided he wanted to marry Bishop. Nine years later, in 1957, after a manic breakdown reawakened this fantasy, Lowell explained his embarrassing behavior by reaching back to “that long swimming and sunning Stonington day” - “...you said rather humorously yet it was truly meant, “When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived.” Probably you forget, and anyway all that is mercifully changed and all has come right since you found Lota. But at the time... our relations seemed to have reached a new place. I assumed that [it] would be just a matter of time before I proposed and I half believed that you would accept.... But asking you is *the* might have been for me, the one towering change, the other life that might have been had.”

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## POETRY OF THE TIME

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Early 20th Century:

A rejection of traditional poetic form and meter and of Victorian diction marked this period. American poetry moved toward greater density, difficulty, and opacity, with an emphasis on techniques such as fragmentation, ellipsis, allusion, juxtaposition, ironic and shifting personae, and mythic parallelism. The modernist torch was carried in the 1930s mainly by the group of poets known as the Objectivists. Many of the Objectivists came from urban communities of new immigrants, and this new vein of experience and language enriched the growing American idiom.

1940s:

World War II saw the emergence of a new generation of poets, many of whom wrote poetry that sprang from experience of active service. In contrast to the preceding generation, they formed a generation of poets who often wrote in traditional verse forms.

After the war, a number of new poets and poetic movements emerged. The Confessional movement, which was mainly interested in exploring one’s own experiences as subject matter in a style that was consciously and carefully crafted.

1950s & 1960s:

In contrast, the Beat poets, were distinctly raw. Reflecting, sometimes in an extreme form, the more open, relaxed and searching society of the 1950s and 1960s, the Beats pushed the boundaries of the American idiom in the direction of demotic speech perhaps further than any other group. Around the same time, the Black Mountain poets were exploring the possibilities of open form but in a much more programmatic way than the Beats.

Around this time, Deep Image poetry was inspired by the symbolist theory of correspondences, in particular the work of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. The Deep Image movement was also the most international, accompanied by a flood of new translations from Latin American and European poets such as Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, and Tomas Tranströmer.

The Small Press (sometimes called the mimeograph movement) was another influential and eclectic group of poets who surfaced in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1950s. Fiercely independent editors, who were also poets, edited and published low-budget periodicals and chapbooks of emerging poets who might otherwise have gone unnoticed. This work ranged from formal to experimental.

Just as the West Coast had the San Francisco Renaissance and the Small Press Movement, the East Coast produced the New York School. This group aimed to write poetry that spoke directly of everyday experience in everyday language and produced a poetry of urbane wit and elegance that contrasts with the work of their Beat contemporaries (though in other ways, including their mutual respect for American slang and disdain for academic or "cooked" poetry, they were similar).

1970s:

The 1970s saw a revival of interest in surrealism. Performance poetry also emerged from the Beat and hippie happenings, the talk-poems of David Antin (born in 1932), and ritual events performed by Rothenberg, to become a serious poetic stance which embraces multiculturalism and a range of poets from a multiplicity of cultures, including a general growth of interest in poetry by African Americans.

Another group of poets, the Language school have continued and extended the Modernist and Objectivist traditions of the 1930s. Their poems—fragmentary, purposely ungrammatical, sometimes mixing texts from different sources and idioms—can be by turns abstract, lyrical, and highly comic. The Language school includes a high proportion of women, which mirrors another general trend—the rediscovery and promotion of poetry written both by earlier and contemporary women poets.

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## POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. With modern technology, we can contact someone across the globe in a matter of seconds. What do you think is the difference in writing letters - both in the writing process and the response time?
2. Do you have any life-long friends? How has your friendship changed and evolved over the years?

3. If you were to write a poem for your best friend, what type of poem would it be, and what would it be about?
4. Poetry relies on a succinctness of language. Think about a major event in your life and imagine how you might write a short story about it versus writing a poem about it.
5. How do you think the following influence a poet: life experiences, surroundings, relationships, mental health.
6. If you were to write poetry, what do you think would be your biggest inspiration?

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