

TO ELIZABETH BISHOP, WITH LOVE

Laura Maylene Walter

Dear Elizabeth,

I thought of you today for the first time in years. I was in the doctor's waiting room. The woman sitting next to me was called to her appointment, and as she stood up to go, she dropped the magazine she had been reading on the table by my elbow. The moment I saw that yellow-bordered *National Geographic* I thought of you, Elizabeth, and I'm not ashamed to admit it. It was like coming home after spending years away.

I picked up the magazine and flipped through it, thinking of your poem about the waiting room. In that magazine I saw no volcano, no babies with pointed heads wrapped round and round with string, but I was already caught in the *oh* of your voice. And I began to remember.

II.

Everyone these days seems to have a therapist, but since I don't, all I can say is Mrs. Shab would want to know why I'm writing this letter. Mrs. Shab teaches with me at Lincoln Junior High. She wears heavy-duty support hose rolled past her knees and considers algebra God's greatest gift for idle hands. She would not be pleased to learn I am writing to you, even if I lied and told her this was nothing but a bit of amusement to fill my nights. So, in honor of her disapproval, I came up with a list of reasons for writing this letter:

I write to you because you lived in Brazil and I've never been there.

Because you wrote a famous poem about a fish.

Because you once spent a night in a tree.

Because when you were seventeen you walked the length of Cape Cod,
from the elbow to the tip.

Because you are my favorite dead poet.

Finally, I write this letter because I once loved poetry and even wrote

poems myself, years ago. But that's not the point. My old poetry doesn't have much to do with anything, anymore.

III.

Here's the truth: I write to you because you're a secret.

I don't want to hurt your feelings, Elizabeth Bishop, but the average person today has no idea who you are. And not just my eighth grade students, who don't seem to know much of anything, or the man who drives the morning bus or that woman in Armani always on her cell phone in the downtown café. When I say no one knows who you are, I mean no one knows anything about poets, period.

Not that I'm any better. I won't admit this to just anyone, Elizabeth, but I've been known to watch reality TV.

I just realized you don't even know what that is.

IV.

I once heard a recording of you reading your own poetry. I can't remember when this was – I must have been in college, though it could have been earlier than that – and since then I have been unable to read one of those poems without hearing your voice in every word. From lines like *rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!* to the *black, naked women with necks wound round and round with wire*, your voice summons a child who believed in rhythm, in tone. In poetry.

I imagine, in those days you lived in Brazil, that this is the sort of thing you'd think about all day long. Art with a capital A. I'm sorry to tell you, Elizabeth, that things have changed. I don't just mean the greater world, with the Internet and DVR and camera phones and that horrible *American Idol*. I mean me. I've changed, and I'm only realizing how much with every word I write to you at this very moment. I've changed so much I haven't even thought of you in years and years until someone happened to slap down a yellow magazine in a waiting room, of all places.

The truth is, I didn't even try to write this letter by hand. I just sat down at my computer and started type-type-typing. What do you think of that?

V.

I still haven't told you why I was at the doctor's office in the first place. Or, for that matter, why I was so shocked to come home and read what Wikipedia listed as your cause of death: cerebral hemorrhage. In all the time I spent reading your poetry as a teenager, I never knew how you died. It didn't concern me then.

The doctors continue to assure me that my hemorrhage is mild, and that I have a chance at a complete recovery. (A chance, like the milk bottle toss at a carnival. No one ever knocks down those milk bottles.) What I have is not the same thing that killed you. Not exactly. But it's close.

I should tell you that Wikipedia is an unreliable source, and I meant to double check that bit about your cerebral hemorrhage. But I never did. Maybe I don't want to know for sure how you died. I definitely don't want it to be linked to me, proof that something serious is going on under my skull.

If I were a poet, I'd come up with some sort of metaphor: the leaking in my brain, the way I've allowed my life to slip away. But the only poet here is on the other side of this letter.

Oh, Elizabeth. I just realized I've numbered the parts of this letter like stanzas. I swear it was an accident. I bet you would never make that mistake. I'm sure you always knew the form of a piece long before you started to give it shape.

VI.

When you've taught one subject for nearly twenty years, as I have with earth science, the honeymoon period is over. I've memorized all my lessons and anticipate the class's questions – if I'm lucky enough to get students who ask questions at all.

You might wonder why I don't teach English. Maybe I was afraid to view poetry as a job, or to spend eternity grading bad term papers. Or maybe I am more drawn to the mysteries of our planet than I care to admit: geology, oceanography, astronomy, the way air and water and rock create our world.

I had dreams like anyone else. I was going to be a musician, Elizabeth. I was going to be a sculptress, I was going to be a poet. I was going to be someone more than a woman who leaves work tired at the end of the

day, who watches two hours of television before grading some papers and visiting a few online gardening forums before going to bed.

My story is not a new one. I know this. What's so surprising is to sit down and write you a letter only to realize how *unlike* my own self I have become.

VII.

I was married once. Does that surprise you? The ceremony was a week after our college graduation, and the marriage lasted only two years. I was divorced at twenty-three. You, I notice, had the sense not to marry. Of course, you turned to women for romance, making you free even from men.

My marriage was easy enough to end. By the time everything was finalized it felt as if we'd simply lived through an extended weekend beach party, and suddenly it was time to pack up and go home.

Patrick and I don't speak anymore, but we do send each other Christmas cards. A few years ago he included a note with his card, inviting me to join him and his old college friends on a ski trip in Vermont. It was sweet of him, and innocent, but I declined. We had been so much like children during our marriage that I couldn't stand to travel to Vermont and be reminded of how much like a child he still is.

Patrick doesn't know about my hemorrhage. Not many people do. I guess if I had a choice, I'd keep it even from myself.

VIII.

At the end of the school year, my eighth graders will vote on class superlatives. Most popular, most athletic, most artistic, most likely to succeed. The results won't be much of a surprise – junior high students are nothing if not precise in drawing social lines. The teachers will huddle together in the break room and laugh, imagining where Miss Popular or Mr. Athletic will be in fifteen years. The students who aren't picked for anything will feel abandoned, unremarkable. I was one of those students. I'd like to say that these kids are the ones with the brightest futures, but I'm not much proof of that.

From what I gather about your personal life, Elizabeth, you were never exactly hard up for adventures. You traveled, made a lot of friends who also ended up famous, and left books of poetry and beaming reviews

and even a Pulitzer in your wake. No matter what, you kept writing poems and didn't, for example, take a job as an advertising executive to make ends meet and to flesh out a nice 401(k).

I admit it, Elizabeth. I'm bitter. You lived in a time when being a poet was possible. Today, people aren't even reading books. Forget about poetry. It's all Internet and TV and phones that are really computers.

I wish I could stop time and travel back to when you were alive. Maybe you could tell me it's not so bad, dying this way. At the least, I would accept a friendly tea hour at your summer home in Maine, with trees looming in the darkness and your voice—that voice I know so well—telling me everything is marvelous and that the two of us are, after all, the same.

IX.

In one of your poems, you wrote about seeing a moose appear in the road. I loved that poem for being so looming, so *Canadian*. When I returned from the doctor's office today I went straight home and looked for that poem, for the line I had forgotten and needed to see again to believe it was real:

Why, why do we feel (we all feel) this sweet sensation of joy?

I know why, but only briefly. Then it disappears and I am left with my same old misunderstanding. I am left to my television, my websites, my class of eighth graders studying earth science. And Elizabeth, I am left wanting to see that moose.

I want to witness this animal you described as towering, as high as a church. I would crawl off the bus and leave all the passengers behind—even you, my dear Elizabeth—and reach for the moose and her great antlerless head. I would take my time, grand and otherworldly, and when I turned around again it would be your face peering back at me from the bus window.

You make me remember myself: a young girl sitting on a bus, traveling somewhere, anywhere, with her own reflection hovering in the darkness outside.

X.

That is why I write to you, why I keep repeating your name. And Elizabeth, I am sorry. I'm sorry I forgot about you until today in the

waiting room. I'm sorry about the TV and the lazy wasted nights. I'm sorry for giving up on my dreams. For getting divorced, for getting sick. For getting lost. For never seeing that moose.

And I'm sorry for you, too. I'm sorry the world has changed, that poetry doesn't mean the same thing anymore. I'm sorry you had to go and die like all the rest of us will, sooner or later. In the end, Elizabeth, I am so sorry for both of us. And that is just too much for me to bear.

But I'll send this letter anyway, and I'll send it with love. I'll print it out, fold it into thirds, and slip it into an envelope, using my thumb to press down a stamp. I'm not sure yet where to mail it. Maybe Brazil. Maybe to myself. Either way, I won't tell anyone about this letter. I'll keep it between us, saving you as a secret.

I won't even sign my name.