

# The New Criterion

Features March 1983

## The “complete” Elizabeth Bishop

by Brad Leithauser

Elizabeth Bishop was one of those rare poets whose work draws a fair percentage of readers into a cultish devotion. These were readers for whom the appearance of each new poem—and in the last decade of her life, until her death in 1979, her poems arrived at the rate of about one a year—was a looked for, happy event. A sharp-eyed observer, with a voice distinctive to the point of quirkiness, she amassed a range of work unmistakably her own; and perhaps some of that work’s appeal derives from the way its quirkiness can instill in the reader a sense of being among the few who really understand what the woman was up to. This feeling of exclusive, privileged knowledge may easily lead to an ugly clubbism at odds with literature’s egalitarian spirit, but ideally it can offer the reader a treasured gratification: the sense of having established, in that purified preserve where only words exist, a special and an irreplaceable friend.

...

The rest of this article is locked. Please make sure you are logged in to view the full article.

---

**Brad Leithauser's** most recent book is *The Oldest Word for Dawn: New and Selected Poems* (Knopf).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 1 Number 7 , on page 36

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/1983/3/the-aoecompletea-elizabeth-bishop>