

“Familiar, Unbidden”: Finding Home with Elizabeth Bishop

by [Elisa Wouk Almino](#) on November 8, 2015

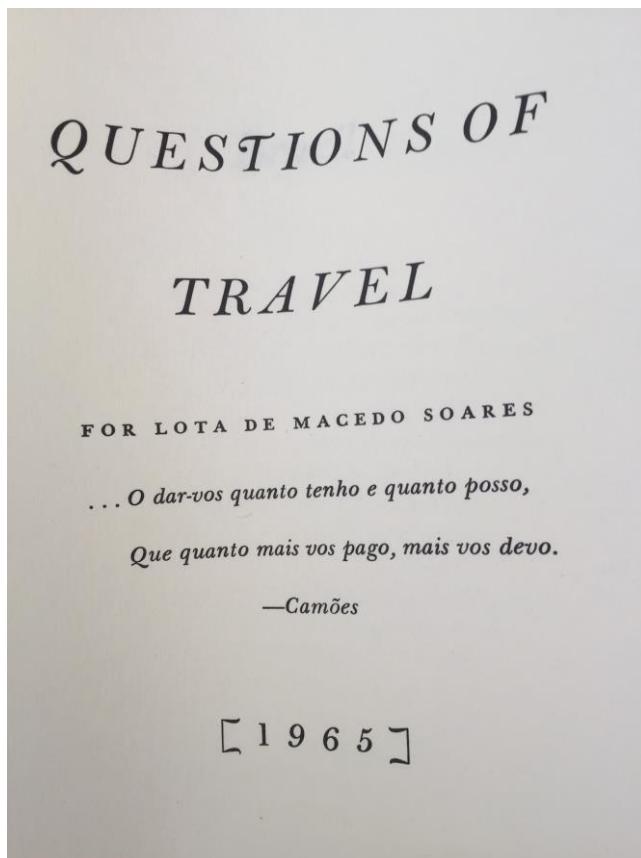


Film still from the documentary ‘Welcome to This House’ by Barbara Hammer, featuring Lota de Macedo Soares and Elizabeth Bishop (image courtesy Barbara Hammer)

Having grown up in seven different cities, there is no place I have ever felt particularly at home. My nationality, Brazilian, confuses most as I have lived in Brazil only three years out of my 25. And yet Brazil provokes a particular sense of longing for home — a sense made effable through the wave-like inflections of Portuguese and the quick, circular rhythms of samba; through the weight of a coconut in my hands in Rio de Janeiro and the landscape of scissor-shaped roads in Brasília. But, over time, I’ve found that home is not always attached to place.

I’d long struggled to define what home meant to me, until I read [Elizabeth Bishop](#)’s poetry in college. I became particularly drawn to the poems she wrote while living in Brazil, where she went on vacation in 1951 and decided to remain for 15 years after falling in love with the Carioca architect [Lota de Macedo Soares](#). Together they moved far up in the mountains of Petrópolis, in a house designed by Soares. It became known as the Samambaia house, for which — after having lived there for eight years — Bishop wrote a kind of ode and goodbye, titled “[Song for the Rainy Season](#)” (1960). In the poem, she describes the house’s surrounding habitat as simultaneously “familiar, unbidden”: familiar because it is her home, but unwelcoming because it is nonetheless strange. Brazil was certainly exotic to her — even after living there for a while, she did not become acclimated and she would never feel

comfortable with her Portuguese — but this sense of alienation is present in the poems she wrote in all the places she lived, as she assumed the role of foreigner to the world.



‘Questions of Travel’ by Elizabeth Bishop (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted) (click to enlarge)

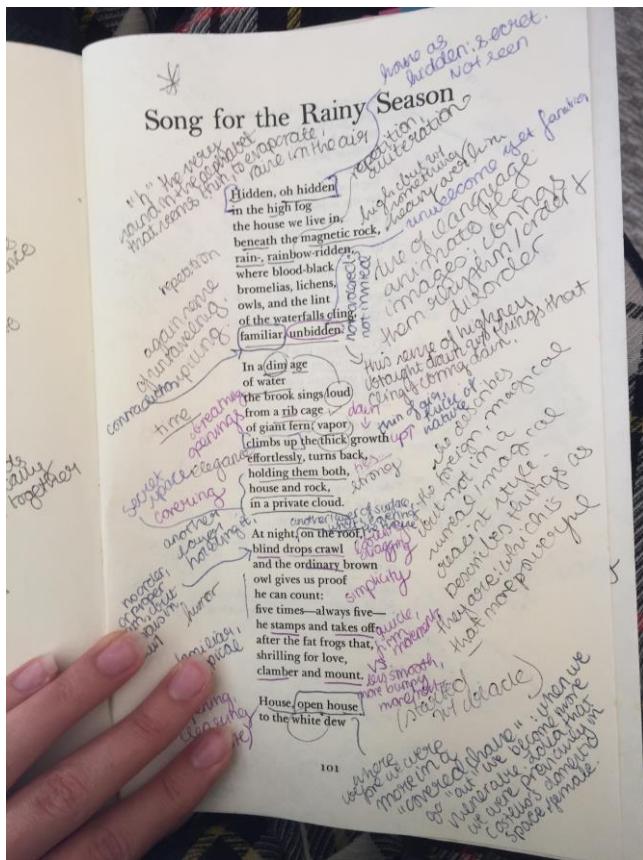
Throughout her life Bishop struggled, as I have, to associate home with a geographical location. She spent her childhood shuttling back and forth between Nova Scotia and Massachusetts, and as an adult she led a nomadic life, moving among various cities in the US (Poughkeepsie, New York City, Key West, and Cambridge) and Brazil (in Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro, and Ouro Preto). She was constantly estranged and yearning for travel, wondering, as in her poem “Questions of Travel” (1956), “*Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?*”

The poet’s sense of homelessness is the focus of [Barbara Hammer](#)’s latest documentary, [Welcome to This House](#), which travels to each of Bishop’s homes. It begins in Nova Scotia, her place of birth, with handheld, unsteadily circular pans of the rooms of her childhood home — over the tiled floors, up the curtains and walls, and across the ceilings. “I was always a sort of guest,” her voice from childhood says. The shot often freezes or cuts away abruptly, then picks up again; a photo of her as a girl will emerge translucent from a window, then fade. “How she looked at the world was actually shaped inside these rooms,” we hear.

Home, for Bishop, was not found in a place (though she desired this) but rather in how she observed her surroundings. Her wandering eye suggests a continuity in her life of travel, even if the places were as disparate as the lush landscapes of Petrópolis and the tidy borders of the Boston wharf. In a journal from the mid-1930s, she [writes](#):

Reality [...] is something like a huge circus tent, folding, adjustable, which we carry around with us and set up wherever we are. It possesses the magical property of being able to take on characteristics of whatever place we are in, in fact it can become identical with it.

Perhaps reality is just the way we see, the way we “set up.” Bishop’s reality is visualized into an imaginary tent, as if perception were her own enclosed space, her own home.

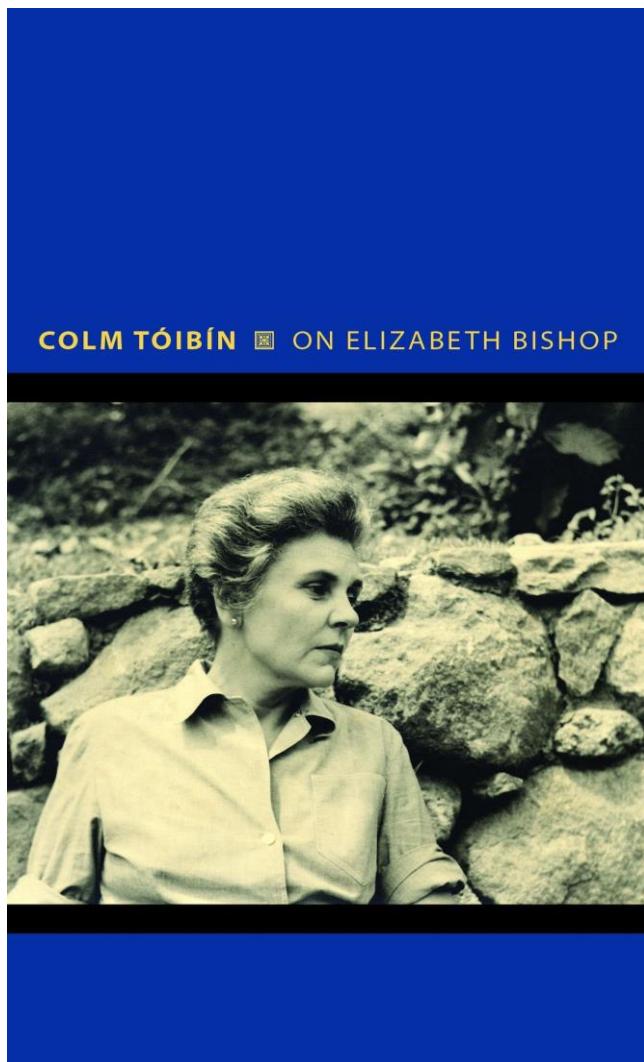


The author’s annotated copy of “Song for the Rainy Season” by Elizabeth Bishop (click to enlarge)

Like Bishop, I’ve carried home along with me and “set up” wherever I am. Part of setting up involves my belongings, my physical constants, though I have also built my homes out of absences. Some of these absences are concrete, like the people I left behind. I keep them inside my homes even when they aren’t around; what is absent, then, becomes present. In Portuguese we call this melancholic yet comforting presence of absence “*saudade*.” As I have continually moved into one home at the expense of another, the persistent feeling of *saudade* has prevented the places, things, and people left behind from disappearing, allowing them to live on within me. Sometimes, however, what is absent is unclear; I know I’m experiencing *saudade*, but I don’t know what it’s for. It’s this sense that nothing, not even the concrete and observable world, is ever fully there. *Saudade*, for me, is a way of being and seeing, just as it was, I think, for Bishop, who often described the world by suggesting its endless perspectives and acknowledging that something was always missing or partially concealed in her words.

“For her, the most difficult thing to do was to make a statement; around these statements in her poems she created a hard-won aura, a strange sad acceptance that this statement was all that could be said. Or maybe there was something more, but it had escaped her,” [Colm Tóibín](#)

writes in his recent book [*On Elizabeth Bishop*](#), which, like *Welcome to This House*, interprets the poet's work through her life of travel. But his book is also a personal one: like Bishop, he feels to inhabit "this space between what there was and what could be." He makes various parallels between his life and hers, including being gay and growing up among family members who often kept their feelings at bay. He would discover Bishop's poetry at the age of 19, identifying with her life of travel when he left his home in southeast Ireland for Barcelona, beginning his own life of exile that would take him to Argentina, New York, and other places. Ireland, he says, is like Nova Scotia for Bishop: a "place of loss." Her leaving home, he believes, was a "flight from loss," as he feels to share with her an impossible will to forget home.



'On Elizabeth Bishop' by Colm Tóibín (image courtesy Princeton University Press) (click to enlarge)

"Description was a desperate way of avoiding self-description; looking at the world was a way of looking out from the self," Tóibín writes. The "I" in Bishop's poems is often refrained and her perspective is one of remove. In "Song for the Rainy Season," the Samambaia house has a life of its own. Bishop regards her home, tethered to its environment, from a seeming distance: "Vapor climbs up" and "turns back,/ holding them both,/ house and rock,/ in a

private cloud,” looping around them like a ribbon on a package. We are somewhere “private” and Bishop, though the inhabitant, is shut out.

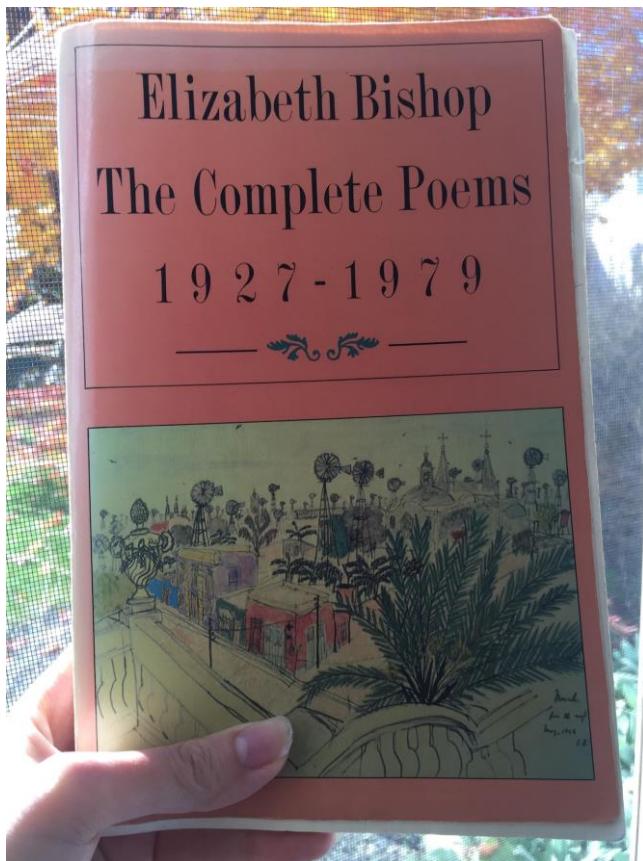
Tóibín attributes her searching eye and longing for travel to the suppression and haunted memories of her past. He, like Hammer in her film, stresses the poet’s troubled childhood: her father died when she was a baby and her mother was sent to an asylum when Bishop was five, leaving her in the care of her grandparents. In one of its first scenes, *Welcome to this House* cites the opening line of the poet’s short story “[In the Village](#)” (1953): “The scream,” — that of her sick mother — “the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village.” Throughout the movie, shrill sighs and soft shushes reverberate — signs that Bishop’s disturbed subconscious follows her wherever she goes.

Still, as the movie — and Bishop’s many letters — makes clear, her years at Samambaia were some of her happiest. In the poem, we witness her awe and sorrow as she is at once close to and far from something she holds dear — it’s clear she’s come to understand and memorize the house’s ways. She knows that an owl “counts” “five times — always five” and only after “the fat frogs [...] clamber and mount.” The house becomes an intimate vision she cannot stand to lose. “Rejoice!” she writes, “For a later/ era will differ.” Literally, she describes the change of seasons from rainy to dry. But the stanza continues:

(O difference that kills
or intimidates, much
of all our small shadowy
life!)

Things are always changing, especially in a life of travel. The year Bishop published the poem, [in 1960 for *The New Yorker*](#), she and Soares would leave Petrópolis. As Tóibín beautifully articulates, “Slowly, the self then emerged with the same stark force that silence has in music.” We detect Bishop’s presence and emotion in the silences surrounding her carefully chosen words and in the precise observations of someone who has looked and looked.

It seems to me that Hammer’s film, Tóibín’s book, and my own writing are all attempts to fill in these silences. (“I have a close relationship with silence, with things withheld, things known and not said,” Tóibín says.) In the film, we feel as if we’re going in circles, as photos of Bishop appear and disappear in a palimpsest and questions about her life (mainly, her discreet lesbian love affairs and hazy sense of home) and poetry refuse to be definitively answered.



‘Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems’ (click to enlarge)

In reference to “Poem” (1976), in which Bishop describes a painting depicting a Nova Scotian scene, Tóibín notes “a slow recognition that this was a place of loss, but that to name the loss would be to lose it further, to lose what was remembered and what was experienced, to betray it somehow.” This is true of Samambaia in “Song for the Rainy Season” as well. The poem builds suspense as we move gradually closer to the interior of “the house, open house.” But once inside, faced “with a wall / for the mildew’s / ignorant map,” we are given no more than a moment before the scenery reverses, unravels, and undoes itself with Bishop’s foretelling of the coming of the dry season:

.... Without water
the great rock will stare
unmagnetized, bare,
no longer wearing
rainbows or rain

The fog will be gone; the house will be naked. The waterfalls will “shrive/in the steady sun.” The sounds will have hushed, the images stripped, and the life surrounding the house lost.

The loss of the rainy season evokes the loss of the home. We cannot hold the house together; suddenly the image we have gathered slips from view. Though the house and rainy season remain, they are already absent — they are at once there and not there.

In one of his poems, the Brazilian poet [Paulo Leminski](#) described *saudade* as “when near becomes far / when far becomes near” — an effect of Bishop’s unstable images and situations. Her poems have given color, words, and life to my world of absences, where loss lives on as absence and confuses the present with the past. “Song for the Rainy Season” leaves us in a state of longing, on the one hand for a home that will soon no longer be, and on the other, for a home that is there but somehow already gone. Perhaps nothing is ever really gone, and home is in no specific place. Home is as much about what resides in us as where we reside.

On Elizabeth Bishop by Colm Tóibín is out now from [Princeton University Press](#). Welcome to This House will screen with Barbara Hammer in attendance at [Amherst Cinema](#) (28 Amity St, Amherst, MA) on November 9 at 7pm. For future screenings please check the movie’s [website](#).