

POETRY

Hideaway

by Katrina Dodson

Elizabeth Bishop has become one of the most admired figures in 20th-century American poetry, yet the two places she felt most at home were Nova Scotia and Brazil, associations that link the poet to the Americas beyond the United States. Nova Scotia was the land of Bishop's early childhood, while her attachment to Brazil was formed by happy accident. During a trip around South America, she was delayed in Rio de Janeiro because of an allergic reaction to a cashew fruit sampled at the home of Lota de Macedo Soares. Her host became her nurse, and by the end of Bishop's convalescence, the two had fallen in love. Bishop spent the next two decades living off and on in Brazil, incorporating the country's sights and culture into her poetry while also translating several Brazilian writers into English.

At the time of Bishop's arrival, Lota was building a modern house in the middle of the rainforest on her land, the Fazenda Samambaia, on the outskirts of the mountain town of Petrópolis. The house later became the site of the poem printed here, which first appeared in *The New Yorker* on October 8, 1960, and was later collected in *Questions of Travel* (1965). The poet describes her wonder at the landscape in a letter to Marianne Moore dated February 14, 1952, about two months after her initial arrival:

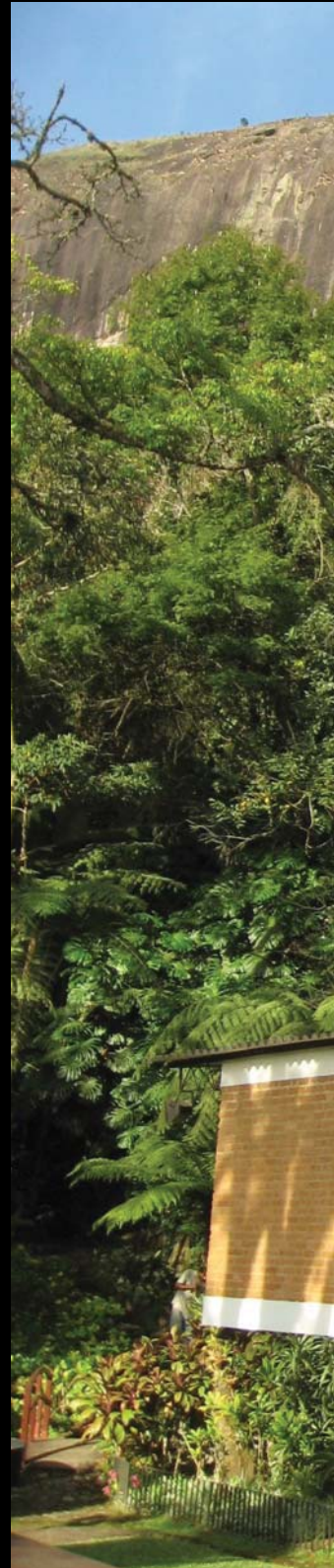
I have been staying mostly at my friend Lota's country place in Petrópolis, about 40 miles from Rio, and it is a sort of dream-combination of plant & animal life. I really can't believe it at all. Not only are there highly impractical mountains all around with clouds floating in & out of one's bedroom, but waterfalls, orchids, all the Key West flowers I know & Northern apples and pears as well.

In this poem, inspired by the house and its surroundings during the peak of the summer rainy season, the speaker envisions a future time in which the fog has lifted and the water has dried up. The mountainous rock above the house did indeed stand bare when I took this picture while visiting Samambaia this past July, during the Brazilian winter, and my imagination moved back in time to the softer, more romantic season of the poem, which celebrates the cherished "warm breath" of this lover's retreat.

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Song for the Rainy Season

From Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*,
© Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1984.



The house Elizabeth Bishop shared with Lota de Macedo Soares on the Fazenda Samambaia.

Photo by Katrina Dodson.

Hidden, oh hidden
in the high fog
the house we live in,
beneath the magnetic rock,
rain-, rainbow-ridden,
where blood-black
bromelias, lichens,
owls, and the lint
of the waterfalls cling,
familiar, unbidden.

In a dim age
of water
the brook sings loud
from a rib cage
of giant fern; vapor
climbs up the thick growth
effortlessly, turns back,
holding them both,
house and rock,
in a private cloud.

At night, on the roof,
blind drops crawl
and the ordinary brown
owl gives us proof
he can count:
five times — always five —
he stamps and takes off
after the fat frogs that,
shrilling for love,
clamber and mount.

House, open house
to the white dew
and the milk-white sunrise
kind to the eyes,
to membership
of silver fish, mouse,
bookworms,
big moths; with a wall
for the mildew's
ignorant map;

darkened and tarnished
by the warm touch
of the warm breath,
maculate, cherished,
rejoice! For a later
era will differ.
(O difference that kills,
or intimidates, much
of all our small shadowy
life!) Without water

the great rock will stare
unmagnetized, bare,
no longer wearing
rainbows or rain,
the forgiving air
and the high fog gone;
the owls will move on
and the several
waterfalls shrivel
in the steady sun.

*Sítio da Alcobacilha
Fazenda Samambaia
Petrópolis*

