

# The New Criterion

## Features

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### Elizabeth Bishop: from coterie to canon

by [Dana Gioia](#)

On the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop & the “important but elusive aspects of contemporary literary culture” that her canonization has revealed.

Time to plant tears, *says the almanac.*  
—“Sestina”

“Oh, please,” Elizabeth Bishop once told me, “Let’s not talk about poetry.” And that afternoon we didn’t. But now, thirty years later, my friend and teacher is no longer here to stop me with one of her firm looks. So, with apologies to Miss Bishop’s shade, I shall proceed, though I know she would have been both impatient and embarrassed to read an essay in her honor. And it is my intention to honor her—not with a general panegyric but what I hope is a dispassionate and detailed look at the reasons behind her current popularity.

My subject is how Elizabeth Bishop came—slowly and surprisingly—to be considered the most highly esteemed American poet of the mid-twentieth century. Had I been discussing the leading mid-century poet thirty years ago, my subject would ne ...

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