

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia Newsletter

Vol. 16

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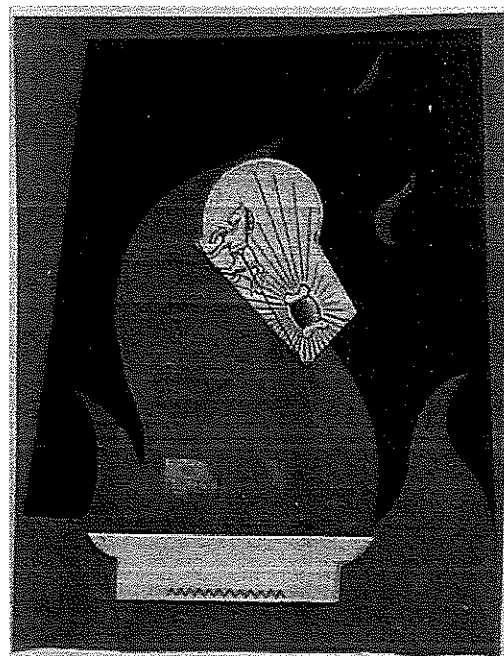
by Sandra Barry 16

The EBSNS was formed in 1994 to celebrate the life and work of the poet Elizabeth Bishop. It produces an annual newsletter. In 1998, it published *Elizabeth Bishop: An Archival Guide to Her Life In Nova Scotia*, documenting Bishop and Bishop-related documents in the province. The EBSNS contributed to the purchase of an extensive family archive that documents Bishop's Nova Scotia childhood and is housed at Acadia University Archives. The EBSNS holds its AGM in Great Village in June. It seeks through various activities to promote the appreciation and study of Elizabeth Bishop as a Nova Scotia writer, thus enriching our literary and cultural heritage.

The Educated Eye

Peggy Samuels, *Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2010.

by Bert Almon



Kurt Schwitters, *Collage*,
Mexico City Museum of Modern Art

Peggy Samuels has made a strong contribution to Elizabeth Bishop studies, one that others can learn from and extend. Bishop is a highly visual poet, but, as Samuels points out, she was suspicious of the ekphrastic poem. Her most obvious examples of that genre both deal with bad paintings by her great-uncle George Hutchinson. Yet her work is full of views and scenes and complex landscapes. And of course we know she often went to galleries with another art-loving poet, Marianne Moore. Samuels has documented what Bishop learned from Paul Klee, Kurt Schwitters, and Alexander Calder, and she demonstrates

through superb close readings how Bishop used this knowledge in major poems. The book is well-illustrated with colour and black and white reproductions so that the impact of art on Bishop is made manifest. It is a truism of Modernist studies that innovative literature is inspired by avant-garde art, and Samuels shows us what Bishop learned from her particular models.

The documentation is impressive and a signpost to future scholars. Letters, manuscripts, journals and museum catalogues reveal in minute particulars Bishop's preoccupation with modern art. One of the poet's closest friends, Margaret Miller, was an associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art. Bishop sent all of her poems to Miller, who shared her expertise and her books with the poet. Miller edited MoMA's 1945 book on Paul Klee and prepared an important exhibition on collage in which Kurt Schwitters was the keystone. She discussed all of these projects with Bishop and was often her guide at exhibitions. Poets often spend fruitful time in galleries, but the opportunity to discuss art with a pioneer in the field of art history may have been unique. It is as if the poet had her personal docent. Miller sent Bishop a MoMA exhibition book on *The Art of the South Seas*, which led to the creation of the remarkable poem "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance." Samuels presents a brilliant reading of the poem in relation to the illustrated catalogue, showing how Bishop managed to move from describing the pictures to imagining travel through the lands they depict.

Paul Klee's ability to blur the boundaries between the internal and external, the self and its environment, had a powerful impact on Bishop. In picture after picture, the human figure seems to bring the external into itself and vice versa. And sometimes the eye of the beholder is represented in the painting or drawing. Samuels shows the impact of Klee's practice on a number of poems, including "Faustina, or Rock Roses," a poem whose unsettling effect is shown to hinge on the complex and shifting point of view. As Samuels says, "Bishop began to use the work of Klee to reimagine the position of the lyric speaker." Klee's celebrated "moving line" was important for Bishop as well. She liked shifting contours and boundaries.

As for Schwitters, his collages, with their multiple textures and colours, suggest that a variety of materials can work together in a work of art. Samuels emphasizes that collage as used by Schwitters need not work through violent dissociations. Schwitters is more interested in gradients and modulations than discords and ironic juxtapositions. Schwitters speaks of "interpermeating" as a technique. Samuels shows the influence of Schwitters at work in a number of important poems: "At the Fishhouses," "Insomnia," "Prodigal," and "Cape Breton."

Bishop knew Alexander Calder's mobiles very well, and they offered some models for arranging objects in verbal space and representing their complex motions. Samuels demonstrates the influence with readings of "The Armadillo," and "A Cold Spring." Some of Bishop's major poems, like "The Moose" and "Cape Breton," show the influence of all three artists: Klee, Schwitters, and Calder. Samuels is particularly careful to look at the mid-century reception of Calder as an alternative to the static geometrical qualities of Mondrian, a critical debate that Bishop was familiar with. Bishop likes to describe motions in a scene. Ezra Pound said in "A Retrospect" that a poet should not be "viewy," and Bishop is not, if that coinage means a naïve depiction. He also suggested that the poet should not describe landscape because the painter can do it better. But perhaps a poet with insights gleaned from painting can do it as well.

Samuels is perhaps most interesting in her reading of Bishop's "Pleasure Seas," a poem alluding to Seurat's depictions of bathers but not to any single painting. She suggests that Bishop learned from the handling of water imagery in painting that verse too can be a threshold between the inner and outer worlds. "Only by imagining a single surface – verse or water – capable of registering, reflecting, absorbing the materials of mind and nature, a surface on which they could then meet and interact, could the subject prevent itself from becoming scattered by its multiple and shifting sensations." In effect, Samuels is extending M. H. Abrams' concept of the Great Romantic Lyric, the nature poem that moves from inner to outer worlds and back, sometimes oscillating repeatedly. For Bishop, verse functions

as a threshold where complex transactions take place. An in-out-in motion is too simple a pattern. The surface of a poem, like the surface of water or a painting, is a paradoxically deep surface for interactions and refractions: it is the "deep skin" that gives Samuels' book its title. Samuels tries to account for the paradox every serious reader of Bishop experiences: an art of surfaces with remarkable depth.

Samuels has some other keys to Bishop's aesthetic development, and these may open doors in the future. The poet read John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, which explored the concepts of depth and surface in art, with inspiration from Meyer Schapiro's studies of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Schapiro was Margaret Miller's M. A. supervisor, and the two women attended some of his lectures together. In 1935, Erwin Panofsky, the great art historian, gave a course of lectures at NYU, which Bishop audited. She seems to have been interested in his ideas about the ways that artists revise traditional cultural meanings of motifs. There are also suggestive remarks about Bishop's love of Edouard Vuillard's interiors and her reverence for Vermeer. Samuels' book accomplishes a great deal and suggests even more that can be done to track the educated eye of Elizabeth Bishop in its interactions with art.

Bert Almon is a widely published book-reviewer and the author of nine collections of poetry, most recently *A Ghost in Waterloo Station*, winner of the City of Edmonton Book Prize. Originally from Texas, he wrote the first PhD dissertation on Gary Snyder's poetry, and since 1968 he has taught at the University of Alberta. His next book, *Waiting for the Gulf Stream*, is forthcoming from Hagios Press.

Membership in EBSNS costs \$10.00 for one year or \$25.00 (CAN) for three years. Annual dues entitle you to the newsletter and all other privileges of membership.

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Editorial

One evening in April 2010, at Lincoln Center in New York City, a event called "Poetry and the Creative Mind" featured poetry readings by many individuals, including singers Sting and Rosanne Cash, actors Matt Dillon and Gabriel Byrne, and poet Frank Bidart. "Poetry and the Creative Mind" concluded with actor Meryl Streep reading Bishop's "A Cold Spring." The phrase *creative mind* is an apt one not only for Bishop's own work in the realms of poetry, letters, fiction, memoirs, and paintings, but also in relation to the art, commentary, and community that find inspiration in her achievements. With her 100th birthday occurring next year, activities intended to honour the occasion are already in their planning stages. Some of the plans in Nova are outlined on the final page of this issue of the *EBSNS Newsletter*.

Bishop's presence in Canadian literature grows. A recent issue of the Manitoba-based journal CV2 finds young poet David Hickey saying in an interview, "I see Bishop's influence in a lot of Canadian poetry these days." Another Manitoba journal, *Prairie Fire*, has published an essay by Lorri Neilsen Glenn called "The Art of Losing," and Michael Benigni's "The Oracular Imagination in Elizabeth Bishop" appeared last year in *The Antigone Review*. And EBSNS Board member Alexander MacLeod presented a paper on Bishop and vexed questions of poetic nationalities at a conference in Charlottetown.

A forthcoming publication keenly awaited by those who value *One Art* and *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* is Bishop's complete correspondence with *The New Yorker*. Our next issue will include – among many features – a review of that book, along with an essay by poet Carol Frost about her exploration of the area of South Shore Nova Scotia that helped inspire "At the Fishhouses."
BB

Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia
Annual General Meeting
20 June 2009, 1:30 p.m.
Great Village Legion
(Minutes abridged)

Acting President Lois Bray called the AGM to order at 1:30 p.m.... Treasurer Joy Graham distributed copies of the financial report for 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009. As of the latter date we had a bank balance of \$5,346.46. Motion to accept report: Joy Graham. Seconded: Angus Chisholm. Passed....

The next order of business was the Nominating Committee Report by Sandra Barry. Sandra noted that there were three outgoing Board members: Arthur Chisholm, Nancy Corrigan, Margo Wheaton. Sandra thanked these members for their service and enthusiasm. 2009-2010 Executive and Board:
John Barnstead – President
Sandra Barry – Secretary
Joy Graham – Treasurer
Brian Bartlett, Lois Bray, Angus Chisholm, Rebecca Colwell, Meredith Layton, Alexander MacLeod, Linda Shears, Fonda Smyth, Pat Townsend; with three incoming Board members (all present): Rosaria Campbell, Lorrie Gunn, Joy Laking, Motion by Sandra to accept the Report. Seconded: Rebecca Colwell. Passed.

Lois Bray presented the President's Report for 2008-2009. She noted that it was the 15th anniversary of the EBSNS and that our past year had been busy, particularly in our collaborative work with the Great Village Historical Society on the Heritage Project, with four panels now up on the pergola and a fifth in progress. Lois noted that a mock-up of the fifth panel, which is about lumbering, was available for viewing; and that work is being done on two other panels: one on shipbuilding, the other on the shad fishery. She reported that in 2008 the EBSNS was involved in July 1st Canada Day celebrations in Great Village, and it will be involved again in 2009. She noted the successful "Word in the Village" Elizabeth Bishop Day held on 28 September 2008, and how the EBSNS membership was actively involved in many aspects of that event, a successful fund-raiser for a number of community groups, including the EBSNS. Lois also noted that the EBSNS is launching a new website – a great leap forward in our capacity to communicate with our members and the wider world.

Lois made special mention of two of the outgoing Board members, Nancy Corrigan and Arthur Chisholm. Nancy has been very active throughout several years on the

Board and her departure will be greatly felt. Arthur was one of the founding members of the EBSNS. Such long-standing commitment is deeply appreciated. Lois asked for a round of applause for these stalwart Board members, and an enthusiastic one was given.

In other business, Joy Graham reported that membership dues of the EBSNS (\$8.00 for one year and \$20.00 for three years) had not been raised since the Society was formed; and that the Society had absorbed increased costs rather than raising dues, and had engaged in separate fund-raising to supplement income for programmes and activities, which was becoming more difficult because of the busy lives of Board members. Joy proposed that dues be raised from \$8 to \$10 for one year and from \$20 to \$25 for three years. Motion to accept: Joy Graham. Seconded: June Chisholm. Passed.

Joy noted that since Arthur Chisholm has been a signing officer, a replacement signing officer would be needed. And she said she'd be happy to take any more membership dues or money for booklets.

Nancy Corrigan reported on the plan to hold another Elizabeth Bishop Day in Great Village on October 3, 2009. The year's theme will be focussed on Bishop's time in Brazil. The morning will focus on youth – with the main event a workshop, conducted by a Halifax dance troupe, on an African-Brazilian traditional dance called *capoeira*. The Community Association will reprise its highly successful chowder lunch, to be followed in the afternoon by a concert around Brazilian music and Bishop's Brazilian poetry. John Barnstead and Joanne Hatfield, a composer and musician from Brookfield, will be principals involved in the concert. A community supper, with some Brazilian flavours, is planned. The guest speakers for the evening will be Joy Laking and Jim Wyatt, who earlier in the year spent some time in Brazil during an extended tour of South America.

Lois thanked the Board members for their involvement and enthusiasm and the women of the Fire Brigade Auxiliary for their usual stellar job with the sandwiches and sweets. Sandra also thanked Lois for stepping in as Acting Chair for the year, and for keeping the Board and various communities moving forward on a number of projects. A heartfelt round of applause followed.

After adjournment, Rebecca Colwell turned our attention to the projector and screen for a presentation on the new EBSNS website. She noted that there are many ideas and plans for expanding it. John Barnstead thanked Rebecca for getting this important community tool up and running so impressively.

1599 Pacific Avenue

by Julie Bruck

From <http://speakingofpoems.blogspot.com/>,
a blog by David Kosub of Victoria, B.C.

Julie Bruck, guest blogger, provided the following
short essay for December 11, 2009.

For many years, I've read and reread Elizabeth Bishop's poems and prose, as well as biographies and critical studies of her life and work. So when *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* was published last year, I spent a vacation week deep in those thirty years of letters. Between Bishop's characteristic reticence, her "immense, glistening, sibilant loneliness," and Lowell's combination of New England uprightness and brutal manic episodes, the letters of these long-time friends were often most moving for what was left unsaid between them.

After the suicide of her lover, Lota de Macedo Soares, the corrosive effect of Bishop's drinking became more apparent in her letters (she was good at covering, but she'd begun to break bones in falls during blackouts). I read the last third of the book with a mounting sense of dread, as both her own and Lowell's lives seemed to spiral downward with an awful, accelerating inevitability.

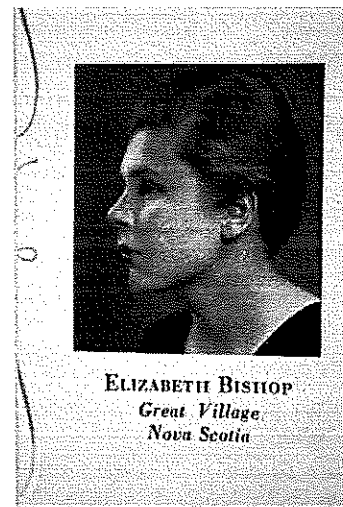
One particular surprise to me in the letters was that Bishop had lived in San Francisco – my current home – in 1968, just months after Lota's death. Like many periods of Bishop's life, this one was notable for her feelings of limbo – she was, typically, between jobs, loves, and homes. But she and a young friend "found a rather funny but comfortable flat on Pacific Avenue – a steam laundry (almost silent) on one side – a body painting place (for CARS, that is!) across the street and also the Cancer Society." Her letters describe the place as a "... pea green wooden early 20th-cent. building – 4 bay windows – 2 fireplaces – I really like it, and right near Polk Street."

1599 Pacific Avenue is just a few miles from where I live. I typed the address into Google Earth's search engine, and Google placed 1599 right on a

traffic island in the middle of Pacific and Polk – a busy intersection. So, I wrote the number down, and drove across town. After circling what should have been her block, I concluded that the apartment must have been torn down, since there seemed to be no building with that number. When I got home, I saw that I'd transposed the numbers. No matter, I'd go back another day. And I did, on a day when I was running an errand in that part of town. This time, though, I forgot the slip of paper with her corrected address on my desk.

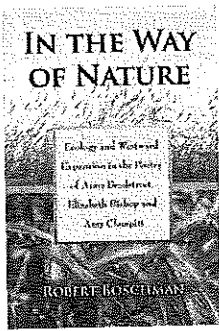
I'm not going back. I am still grateful for the new collection of letters and I hope, one day, to visit the house in Great Village, Nova Scotia, where she spent her early years. But 1599 Pacific Avenue, whether or not it's still standing in the shifting San Francisco light, is now outside my frame of reference. I got the message. Instead, I'm going back to her poems, where Bishop continues, as James Merrill observed, her "lifelong impersonations of an ordinary woman," and where, in her own words, "All the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful."

Julie Bruck is a Montreal-born, San Francisco-based poet and teacher. Her books include *The Woman Downstairs*, *The End of Travel* (the title is a phrase from Bishop), and a newly completed manuscript, *Monkey Ranch*. Recent work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Malahat Review*.



From the 1934 Vassar College yearbook, edited by Bishop. Though she had lived for many years in Massachusetts, she cited Nova Scotia as her home.

Paradoxes of Travel



Robert Boschman,
*In the Way of Nature: Ecology
and Westward Expansion in the
Poetry of Anne Bradstreet,
Elizabeth Bishop and Amy
Clampitt.* McFarlane Publishers,
2009.

by Susie DeCoste

In the ecocritical study *In the Way of Nature: Ecology and Westward Expansion in the Poetry of Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Bishop and Amy Clampitt*, Robert Boschman reads the *oeuvres* of three American women poets to explore the historical perspectives that have fostered the belief that culture is separate from nature. The poets in this book are linked through their preoccupations with travel, cartography, and evolving ideas of home. There are two chapters on each poet. In these pairings of chapters, the first explores the poet's attitude toward Westward expansion, what Boschman defines as a kind of colonization of land and nature: the physical ways Europeans have settled in North America. The second chapters explore how these poets deal with the dichotomy of nature and culture.

Bradstreet (1612-1672), a pioneering early seventeenth-century Puritan, moved from England to New England with the ideals of growing a new society. Westward expansion, the great American mythos, brings with it a preoccupation with the distance between England and Englishness. Boschman sees Bradstreet as "help[ing] to ease the pain of...various kinds of separation," including distance from a number of places and persons. Readers of Bishop know that her work is similarly interested in distance, distancelessness, separation, and loss. Boschman contends that twentieth-century poet Amy Clampitt (1920 -1994) "continues the work of Bishop, taking up where she left off in her poetic anatomy of culture and its ecological impact." Clampitt is connected to Bishop in her use of casual, reticent language. Many of her travel poems are highway and bus poems, linking

her indirectly to Bishop's "Questions of Travel" and "The Moose."

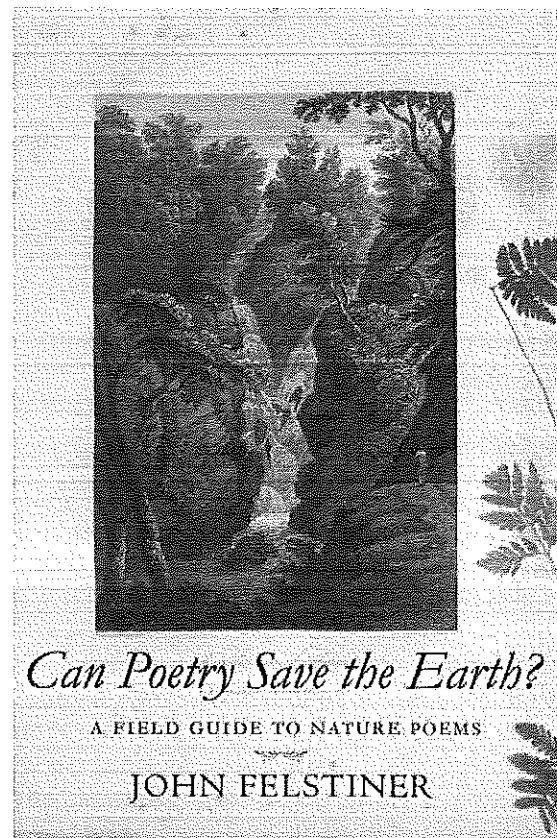
Bishop's particular interest in travel and cartography lends itself well to the chapter on "westward expansion" that focuses solely on her work: "Elizabeth Bishop: To Dream Our Dreams – Questions of Distance and Desire." Boschman cites Bishop as frustrated by the already mapped nature of the world, which might limit the value of travel. This chapter investigates similarities between Bishop and Charles Darwin as global travelers. Boschman looks at Bishop's exploration of conquest and acquisition, which are often associated with the Westward push of colonialism. Looking closely at Bishop's travel poems and Brazil poems, Boschman puts Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* to use. The level of seriousness with which Bishop does, or does not, treat her constant searching for home is found in her casual language, which Boschman says "acts as a distracting veneer to the compelling and stark underlying issues." One of such issues is the possibility that travel is unsatisfactory. While Bishop refers to an "older and seemingly more stable but also destructive tradition of travel," she simultaneously critiques those more "satisfying" arrivals and supposed possessions, especially in Brazil poems like "Arrival in Santos," making travel a continually deferred fulfillment.

Boschman addresses some of my favourite poems in the second chapter on Bishop, "Elizabeth Bishop: Garden Knowledge; Wild Knowledge." This chapter is an insightful study of animals in Bishop's poetry – a fish, a seal, a moose. If these animals embody and stand metonymically for nature, Boschman argues, an analysis of the inherent attitudes toward these animals in the poems will reveal some potentially useful ways of conceiving the nature/culture dichotomy (or unit). Bishop's interest in grounding her poems in the physical world makes her work open to this kind of critical inquiry. In an analysis of "At the Fishhouses," Boschman shares a particularly astute insight about Bishop's interest in nature: "Whether we are makers of fishing nets, gardens, or poems, we draw patterns that are impositions on nature – and if we should touch or taste or in any way immerse ourselves in the wilderness itself, we will come up against both the transience and origins of our patterns." What I especially admire about this

passage is Boschman's idea that Bishop sees nature as imposed upon by humans, occurring in what Seamus Heaney refers to as her "scientific impulse" of ordering, organizing, and quantifying space and objects. Also, Boschman's analysis of "The Map" suggests that maps and poetry are similar constructions that highlight "the false binaries of culture and nature": "Once land has been possessed, its contours begin to reflect the ideological contours of the makers and readers of maps. Through naming, maps permit further familiarization with terrain that may otherwise remain unknown." The paradoxes of travel, and Bishop's treatment of travel, Boschman notes, are endlessly rich.

In his second chapter on Bishop, Boschman comes up against a problem that runs through any text that sets out to be ecocritical: since human beings indeed impose upon nature, anthropocentrism in ecocriticism is always problematic, and a paradox of ecocriticism itself. Boschman begins the text with an assertion that "The global human community is one of peril: through its own actions it is itself imperiled, and it has imperiled nonhuman life along with it." Apprehending the various definitions of nature and culture in Bishop, Bradstreet, and Clampitt is, for Boschman, a way to "proceed with the urgent ecological discourse that [Boschman sees as] already well underway." As Boschman aptly points out with the help of Raymond Williams, "Nature has become so humanized and acted upon that it is arguably no longer nature but culture." The nature/culture dichotomy is troubled through the very definition of its terms. If nature and culture are separate, and if culture has destroyed nature, and if the only solution is to rejoin the two so that humans may not continue to feel superior or separate, then how can we even begin to write about this subject authoritatively as humans?

Susie DeCoste is writing a Ph.D. dissertation on Elizabeth Bishop's Nova Scotia poems and questions of Maritime literary regionalism. She tutors at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and teaches children's literature through distance education at the University of Waterloo. Her poems have appeared in journals in Canada and Ireland.



Reading "Poem"

by John Felstiner

In March 2009, Yale University Press published John Felstiner's *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems*. In the fall of 2010 Yale will publish a paperback edition of this major study. In it Felstiner discusses Elizabeth Bishop's "Poem," and includes a life-size reproduction of the small painting by Bishop's Great Uncle George that helped inspire the poem. With his generous permission, we present here a passage from *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*

"I'd like to be a painter most, I think." Indeed she was one. Elizabeth Bishop's seemingly naïve water-colors, her touch for line, shape, color, and detail, slightly skew perspective, foreshorten and interrupt, always surprising.

Shortly after "The Moose" she wrote "Poem," about a great-uncle's oil painting handed down by her aunt, depicting the village and landscape of

Bishop's childhood – or slightly before. Her title has designs on us too, as to how we really see things.

About the size of an old-size dollar bill,
American or Canadian,
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays
– this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)

Every verse has doubts: it's "about" the size,
American "or" Canadian, "mostly" the same colors,
and maybe a sketch. Her tentative questioning
enters the painting:

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple
– that gray-blue wisp – or is it?

That steeple again, from the child's echoing
memory. Surmising, unsentimental, she's aware
that art only fakes reality ("the bits that show"), and
that a "gray-blue wisp" might serve as what we wish
to see. With decades of grime cleaned away, and
magnified five times, that steeple wisp appears – or
does it?

Still and all, a pastoral emerges, line by line
reminding us how paint, illusion, imagination bring
the world alive. (As William Carlos Williams said,
"it's what you *put* on the canvas and *how* you put it
on . . . *words! pigment! put on!*") Looking back into
this scene, Bishop finds white above all – houses,
now geese and iris:

In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.

Actually there are several iris squiggles, the geese
aren't all that white and they're on the meadow, but
yes, brushstroke cows. Then "Poem" with its own
imagination reaches further, divining the picture's
weather, memory's bonus sensation:

The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.

(They were the artist's specialty.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

You can even take Bishop's doubts – "speck-like"
and "Or" and "?" – as deeper sight, take accident
as truth.

Now "Heavens!" and she leaps in bodily, her "I"
speaks up, affectionate toward her hymn-singing
upbringing.

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind – I can almost remember the farmer's name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.

Exploring brush-hairs that hint what's really there,
she can "almost remember" a lost place, set even
deeper because "Those particular geese and cows
/ are naturally before my time." Yet it all "must be."

Bishop once called herself "a Nature Lover" (to
Robert Lowell), a "minor female Wordsworth." But
"Tintern Abbey" has nothing on this poem. At first
"It must be Nova Scotia," then later, "Heavens, I
recognize the place!" Musing how she and her
artist forebear coincide, as do life and art, people
and nature, her mind now surges back through the
painting's surface into time and memory.

I never knew him. We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).

She never knew him, George Hutchinson (1852-
1942), who long ago won a British Royal Academy
prize. So memory's vital. So much depends on that
hedging "or": Do we love what's changed and lost,
or our memory of it? Maybe both, for the painter-
poet:

Our visions coincided – visions" is
too serious a word – our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life," and life itself,
ife and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?

Uncannily, as scientists found out recently, when
we remember a long-gone event, the neurons firing

are the same ones that acted back then. Immersing herself in a small painting, Bishop reclaims the reality of her childhood terrain, makes it present again.

"Poem" in closing verges on tragic, a cadence deepening at each breath, though reminding us it's only artwork:

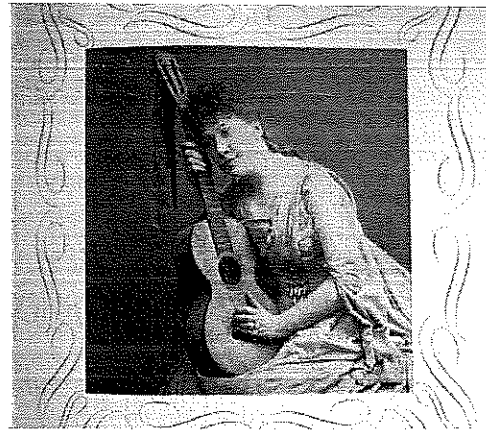
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail
– the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Our earthly trust – what a stirring phrase! As on Keats's Grecian urn this landscape is forever young, these munching cows, crisp iris, spring freshets – not much, but free and about as much life as we can bear. Art gives us what, being mortal, we can take, what's

About the size of our abidance
along with theirs . . .

She fetches up an antique term, "abidance," then lets her line run on, sharing our predicament with other life on earth. We can't go back and save those yet-to-be-dismantled elms, but "how live" they are, "still standing" in Uncle George's painting as in "Poem." This is what art, what memory, what love can do.

John Felstiner's books include *The Lies of Art: Max Beerbohm's Parody and Caricature*; *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*; and *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (winner of the 1997 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism). He has edited and translated *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, and co-edited the Norton anthology *Jewish American Literature*. A Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he has been at Stanford since 1965, and has also taught at the University of Chile, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Yale.



Anonymous guitarist, in 1934
Vassar College yearbook, edited by Bishop

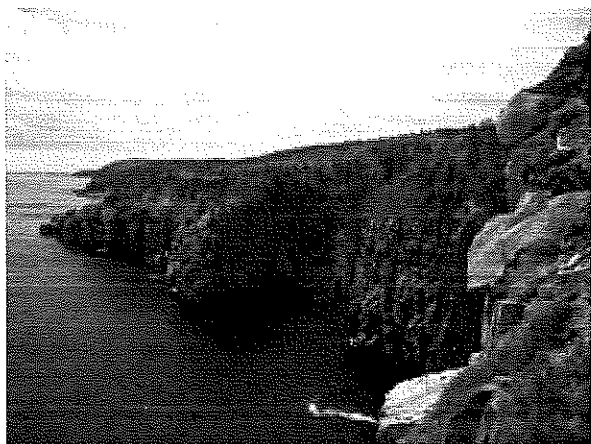
Walking In Bishop's Newfoundland Footsteps

by Linda Rae Dornan

In 2008, when the singer Suzie LeBlanc described her love of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry to me, I had not read Bishop for many years. I soon rectified that, quickly dipping into a phrase here and an image there on a regular basis. Bringing Bishop's poetry into my life again has been a very happy event. Sharing it has been another. In August 2008, Suzie and I walked across the Avalon Peninsula, from St. John's to Norman's Bay, retracing the path which Bishop and her friend Eva walked in 1932. Bishop's Newfoundland journal, though brief, mentioned people and places, and some of her impressions. To our surprise, we were able to meet several descendants of people mentioned in the journal. We also met many generous people who invited us into their homes, helped us with whatever we needed, and were interested in our project. We read poetry to them and invited them to read it to us. I was carrying a video camera and recorded our trip through highway and byway, beach and bog, mountain and blueberry patch. This movie documentary will be shown during the centenary celebrations in 2011.

Following Bishop's path gave us both time to think, to get to know each other, to become physically stronger, and to meet some fantastic Newfoundlanders. One of the main characters in this story is,

of course, the landscape. I have been to Newfoundland many times since 1979 and each time I have felt a binding connection to the land. This trip was even more intense since I was immersed in the landscape every day as we placed one foot in front of the other, travelling from community to community. I found myself wondering about the changes placed upon the land since 1932. In Bishop's journal there are fewer people, fewer cars, more sickness (tuberculosis), less sanitation, less education – but still great hospitality. She and Eva went swimming and jigging, Suzie and I went swimming and on a boat tour (jigging is no longer legal). We did have the traditional jig's dinner, though, courtesy of the Byrne family in Holyrood. The air is still delicious outside major urban centres and the sea has not stopped being overwhelmingly beautiful. I can only imagine the effect on EB of the wilderness she was in. She was a young woman in 1932 storing her impressions and life's experiences for her future poetry.



Avalon Peninsula coast (photo by J.C. Murphy)

Where once there had been dirt roads and paths through forests and along the shore, there were now highways and private shore properties, so whenever we could we walked to a beach and hiked through forests. Seeing the land while on foot instead of speeding through it was about experiencing its smells and textures, and being seduced by what I came to call the Moss World, all green and red and varied. It also made us more open to meeting people along the way. Cheryl (coincidentally, a cousin of the Byrne Family), whom we met on the way to Conception Bay,

offered to drive us a short distance, but instead took us to her favourite spot in the world, a huge waterfall in a rock cliff way out in the middle of nowhere. Vera in Chapel Arm, whom we met on a stony beach after an all-day hike over a boggy mountain, took us home for tea and cake and a chat. *Elizabeth brought us here*, we were thinking through all of our individual re-evaluations and life issues and tired muscles.

The video camera had not recorded the sound as well as I'd wanted that August, so we returned in August 2009 to gather better sound recordings and more footage. Again, we were struck by the hospitality of the people and the beauty of the landscape. Poets Mary Dalton and Don McKay, artists Marlene Creates and Pam Hall, musician Christine Smith and radio producer Chris Brookes, all read while the Byrne family once again opened their doors to us, read Bishop's poetry, and shared history and food.

As I begin the long editing process for the documentary of our trip about Bishop, the Avalon Peninsula, its landscape and its people, I am once again immensely pleased to have Bishop's poetry in my life.

At the suggestion of Suzie LeBlanc and Sandra Barry, I am organizing a short film festival for the Centenary Celebrations in 2011. For anyone interested in making a short film/video about EB's poetry and writings, her life, and anything about her, please make one and send us a copy of it. There will be a screening in 2011, the time and place to be announced later. Stay posted for the deadline and further updates. You can contact me with any questions at Irdornan@yahoo.ca.

Linda Rae Dornan is an interdisciplinary artist working in performance art, video, and installation art. Her documentary *Blue Skies & Rocky Shores: a story of dementia and caregiving* won the Best Low-Budget New Brunswick Documentary, and the Errol Williams Filmmaker Award at the 2008 Silver Wave Festival. She has recently completed *Canfield Creek*, a six-minute documentary about a native spiritual site in Pugwash, NS with Emile Gautreau, elder, storyteller, and Métis/Mi'kmaq spiritual leader.

The Christophian Literary Society

by Sandra Barry

On January 14, 1903 the "Newsy Notes" of Great Village in the *Truro Daily News* reported: "An evening with the Christophian Literary Society ... speaks for our literary taste and culture." In 1961, Elizabeth Bishop received the Women's Institute's newly printed *History of Great Village* from her Aunt Grace. The item that most intrigued her was about "The Literary Society":

In the early 1900s the Great Village Literary Society was formed. Rev. and Mrs. W.M. Crawford were active in the Organization and fortunately Mr. Crawford's successor, Rev. A.L. Fraser, brought to the Group a literary interest and knowledge which assured its continuance.... The Society met fortnightly in the homes of the members, to spend the evening reading and discussing great literature. A winter each was spent on Keats, Ruskin, Mrs. Browning, Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, and two winters on Browning and Tennyson.... The Society did not long continue after Mr. Fraser left in 1914, but for ten years at least, each winter the Group had lived with great writers.

After reading this passage, Bishop was prompted to write to Grace, "And did you see the item about the old 'Literary Club' — I'd like to know how many people in G[reat] V[illage] ever read Browning or Tennyson these days...and it happens everywhere — culture is dying out completely in small places" (20 February 1962, Vassar College). Shortly afterwards, she wrote to Robert Lowell:

The saddest thing is the Literary Society (my mother and aunts belonged) in the early 1900s.... I imagine no one in that village has opened a Milton or a Browning for years now, and TV aerials rise from the shingles. The dying out of local culture seems to me one of the most tragic things this century — and it's true everywhere, I suppose — in Brazil, at any rate. (*One Art*, 407–8)

Why this literary society was called "Christophian" (the *Truro Daily News* spelled it several different ways, including Kristosophian, Kritisphian, etc. — apparently the locals couldn't quite figure it out either) is a mystery. Its guiding light was Rev. Alexander Louis Fraser, Presbyterian minister in Great Village from 1905–1914. In his day, Fraser

was a well-known and beloved poet, who published many books. Though living elsewhere during Bishop's childhood in the village, he continued to summer there during the 1910s. Without a doubt, Bishop would have known him, as he was a friend of her grandparents, mother, and aunts. Even Uncle George Shepherdson had been treasurer of the society for a couple of years.

The society's members did not only gather in parlours and sitting rooms for quiet evenings of reading, discussion and reflection, they also organized concerts. An especially popular event was the annual Robbie Burns night.

Even though the society was defunct by the time the four-year-old Bishop arrived with her mother in Great Village in 1915, its residue persisted. She had vivid memories of her Aunts Maude and Grace reciting Browning and Tennyson to her throughout her childhood. She remembered her grandfather sitting at night in the parlour reading to the family from Burns: "He had a way of reading Burns — he neither wrestled with the Scotch dialect nor ignored it — he conceded wherever necessary. There was just enough to give it a Scotch flavour...a drop of red wine into the clear yellow of the lamp-lit evenings" (Vassar College) Those quiet private readings also brought the memory of her mother's favourite Burns poem: "O wert thou in the cauld blast," which Mendelssohn had set to music, and which she requested that her father read in that lamp-lit parlour. Might she have heard it, too, during one of those Burns nights? In February 1910, as the *Daily News* reported, the literary society hosted "A Burns Night at Great Village" and part of the ambitious programme was a "Duet & violins" rendering of this wrenching poem:

O, wert thou in the cauld blast
On yonder lea, on yonder lea,
My plaidie to the angry airt,
I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee;
Or did misfortune's bitter storms
Around thee blaw, around thee blaw,
Thy bield should be my bosom,
To share it a', to share it a'.

Or were I in the wildest waste,
Sae blaek and bare, sae blaek and bare,
The desert were a paradise,
If thou wert there, if thou wert there:
Or were I monarch o' the globe,

Wi' thee to reign, wi' thee to reign,
The brightest jewel in my crown
Wad be my queen, wad be my queen.

Did the daughter understand more of the mother's
(and widow's) pain hearing these lines spoken
quietly by the (grand)father?

Reflecting on the affect of the society in the lives of
Great Villagers, Rev. Fraser noted: "We found the
little club worthwhile. We had college graduates,
teachers, doctors of medicine, housewives,
merchants, school girls. It gave color to their lives,
and there are people from Halifax, N.S., to
Vancouver, B.C., to recall with pleasure and profit
the discovery of great lines and the hearing of great
music."

Elizabeth Bishop's fear about the dying out of local
culture is a valid one even today. However,
perhaps she would not be too despairing. While not
many people in Great Village are reading Browning
or Tennyson these days, they are more and more
reading Elizabeth Bishop. In the literary and
musical gatherings held now at the Elizabeth
Bishop House and in public spaces in Great Village
(the church, the legion, the school, the community
hall), we not only honour Elizabeth Bishop, but we
also reflect back on the tradition of the Christophian
Literary Society. As the Elizabeth Bishop centenary
approaches, as many artists of all disciplines
prepare to honour and celebrate her continuing
relevance and influence, it behooves us all to think
about the importance of "great literature" in our
lives

**Sandra Barry, former president of the EBSNS and
former editor of this newsletter, has been a tireless
advocate of interest in Bishop for many years, and is
now one of the co-owners of the Bishop-Bulmer
childhood house in Great Village. She has published
an archival guide to Bishop's life in Nova Scotia, co-
edited a book on essays on the poet, completed a
comprehensive study of her Nova Scotian
affiliations, and begun work on a short biography of
her, scheduled for publication by Nimbus in 2011.**

Bishop Recorded

For recordings of Elizabeth Bishop reading her own
poetry, the major source is an audio cassette tape
under her name in the *Voice of the Poet* series from
Random House Audio. Here are internet addresses
for three valuable on-line sites with recordings of
Bishop reading her own poems:

**[dir.salon.com/story/audio/poetry/2001/11/27/
bishop/index-html](http://dir.salon.com/story/audio/poetry/2001/11/27/bishop/index-html)**

"The Fish," "In the Waiting Room," "The Moose"

**[www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/audioitem.
html?id=1626](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/audioitem.html?id=1626)**

"The Roosters," "Crusoe in England," "Filling
Station," "At the Fishhouses"

[www.uvm.edu/sgutman.Bishop/html](http://www.uvm.edu/sgutman/Bishop/html)

"Filling Station," "The Sandpiper," "In the
Waiting Room," "The Armadillo,"
"Manuelzinho"

There are also on-line sites that feature others
reading Bishop's work:

www.pbs.org/newshour.video – and search
"Bishop":

Jane Shore ("One Art," "Letter to N.Y.,"
"In the Waiting Room")
Lloyd Schwartz ("Breakfast Song")

us.macmillan.com/author/elizabethbishop

Robert Pinsky ("At the Fishhouses")
Henry Cole ("The Shampoo")
Thom Gunn ("Varick Street" and "Sonnet")

**[multimedia.boston.com/m/22022276/celebratin
g-library-of-america-s-elizabeth-bishop-poems-
prose-and-letters](http://multimedia.boston.com/m/22022276/celebrating-library-of-america-s-elizabeth-bishop-poems-prose-and-letters)**.

Many readers, including
Frank Bidart ("The Moose")
Peter Sacks ("The Riverman")
Jorie Graham ("Visits to St. Elizabeth's")

**[www.elizabethbishopns.org/writingcompetition.
html](http://www.elizabethbishopns.org/writingcompetition.html)**

Claire Miller ("In the Village")



Marvel

by Andrew Sant

Unexpectedly, one morning, I'm being driven fast
to Great Village, Nova Scotia, where as a kid
Elizabeth Bishop lived – went into the clapboard house,
went up to the little room where she slept, or tried to,
the sleep of a nascent poet. While, downstairs,
her grandparents snoozed by the Little Marvel Stove.
Now forever gone! I looked down at the narrow bed,
up at the skylight right above it, home
of the travelling Milky Way, while nearby roamed
– or soon would – the moose she'd see from a bus
and, with a trans-continental pen, take a
modest twenty years to make, suddenly, marvellous.

Andrew Sant, one of Australia's leading poets, has published many books, including *Tremors: New and Selected Poems* and, most recently, *Fuel and Speed & Other Liberties*. Born in London in 1950 and educated there and in Melbourne, he co-founded the Tasmanian journal *Island* and edited it for ten years. He was writer in residence at the University of Peking in Beijing, China, in 2001, and Writing Fellow at the University of Leicester from 2002-05, as well as at the University of Chichester in 2007-08.

Bishopesque: Grand Pré

by Brian Robinson

At high tide the beach
seems so much simpler
as (forgetting for the moment
the fast-moving clouds)
sheer horizon takes over –
there is no room for detail.
Although at our feet remains
the detritus of this and that
(glacial, fluvial, who knows?),
bits and pieces we might
take home – little more
than what we have brought
to this particular edge of sea
and sky and land (known or unknown
or known unknowns, like the sandpiper's
north-south migration).
Think of the half-seen half-heard
small birds tuned into their own
faint cries or, remoter yet,
the steady flight of some raptor
almost still against the clouds.
Except for the two hunters
(caught forever in plastic orange)
nobody else is out there.
Not so strange then to remember
how History's limit was expulsion,
deportation along the Atlantic shore
brought home today as colonial cleansing or
Evangeline's poetic recall.
And what once was a salt-marsh
is now a grid of meadows, ploughed
but well below sea level
(reclaimed for tourists, politely protected,
heritage for us all, and so on).
All I know is that for certain
in a few short weeks
it will be too cold for us.
Winter will turn sea-foam and mud
into block-sized cakes
of lavender, iodine-like ice.
And now, should we take
a quicker journey home,
short-cut and way back?

Brian Robinson, formerly president of the Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia, recently retired from teaching Geography at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. This is his first published poem.

Returning

by Harry Thurston

All my life I have been returning there,
in dreams to that first place – home,
a farmhouse on a hill above a river,
above the attic, to a secret room – in the air?

I first went there out of loneliness
(even then it seems), a room filled with children,
like me seeking solace. An old woman
dressed in black, like Whistler's mother, watched over us.

In the old house was such a place, a crawl space
behind the book case where one could hide,
look out through the books, spy on the living,
what a writer does from the beginning.

The house, the one in dreams, is never the same.
Sometimes it is abandoned, a disaster;
I pick my way through crumbling lathe and plaster,
up decrepit back stairs, seeking the upper room.

There is no getting there from here. If there were,
what would I find – the children grown old,
the old woman in black gone, my way barred?
All my life I will be returning, but where?

Harry Thurston of Tidnish Bridge, Nova Scotia, is a naturalist, poet, and prose-writer who has published several books of poetry – including *If Men Lived on Earth* and *A Ship Portrait* – as well as many books of prose, such as the award-winning *Tidal Life* and *Island of the Blessed*. "Returning," a poem Thurston hoped to write for many years, emerged during a sojourn in the Bishop-Bulmer house, and appears in his most recent publication, *Animals of My Own Kind: New and Selected Poems* (Signal, 2009).



Bishop-Bulmer house: upstairs,
"the large front bedroom with sloping walls
on either side" ("In the Village") (photo by BB)

Elizabeth Bishop Centenary, 2011 Nova Scotia Events

February 8, 2011 is Elizabeth Bishop's 100th birthday. EBSNS will participate in a year-long celebration of her centenary, comprised of events, activities and projects involving artists from many disciplines and taking place in Great Village, across Nova Scotia and around the world. **EB100** is both a culmination and a commencement. Bishop's legacy will be acknowledged and honoured and her influence will be built upon with the creation of new works of art inspired by her poems, prose, paintings, and eclectic interests.

Since Nova Scotia is the site of some of her most essential creative sources, it is an appropriate location for some of the most interesting activities marking Bishop's centenary. The EBSNS is directly involved in fostering and supporting many of these activities. Our website (www.elizabethbishopns.org) is a virtual nexus where Nova Scotians and others can look for information about what will be happening in the province and elsewhere. The Elizabeth Bishop Centenary blog (www.elizabethbishopcentenary.blogspot.com) is a site for Bishop readers to learn more about her connections to Nova Scotia and to hear from the many Nova Scotian artists about their centenary projects and activities.

From June 9-12, 2011, the University of Kings College in Halifax will host "It Must Be Nova Scotia': Negotiating Place in the Writings of Elizabeth Bishop," an international conference featuring a plenary talk by renowned Irish fiction-writer Colm Tóibín. Overlapping with this conference will be the Scotia Festival of Music, including new pieces of music inspired by Bishop. An Elizabeth Bishop Centenary Writing Competition and a Writers' Festival are being planned by EBSNS. Groups and artists involved in centenary activities include Symphony Nova Scotia and Suzie LeBlanc, ViewPoint Photographic Gallery, the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society, Dende do Recife, Dinuk Wijeratne, and Harry Thurston. It is not possible for the EBSNS to send out information to members each time an event is announced, so we ask you to keep checking the website and blog.

Like Elizabeth Bishop herself, **EB100** has a complex geography – there will be events happening in many places. These events will be both big and small, involving arts groups and individual artists. For the EBSNS and Nova Scotia, one of the motivating forces is multi-disciplinary collaboration, the bringing together of artists from different disciplines to create new and interesting work. Through the celebration and highlighting of Elizabeth Bishop's art, Nova Scotian artists get to express themselves and shine – and to show how both EB's art and their own art are important, generative forces in the world.

– Sandra Barry

Talk by John Felstiner on Elizabeth Bishop's "Poem" and the painting that inspired it
Sun., 13 June 2010, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m.
Writers Federation of Nova Scotia
1111 Marginal Rd., Halifax
Hosted by the Elizabeth Bishop House and the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia

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Elizabeth Bishop Society of Nova Scotia Annual General Meeting
Sat., 19 June 2010 – 1:00 p.m.
Great Village Legion, Great Village
Join us to learn more about *EB100: The Elizabeth Bishop Centenary Celebrations*
Special Guest: Videographer and artist Linda Rae Dornan