

She Mastered the Art of Losing

Elizabeth Bishop was a great American poet whose work was polished and humane; her letters reveal a life that was less serene

By PAUL GRAY

HE SEEMED IN MANY WAYS THE odd woman out among her generation of U.S. poets, and not only because of her gender. Elizabeth Bishop (1911-79) suffered none of the public breakdowns, burnouts and crack-ups that afflicted such talented contemporaries as Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell and Theodore Roethke. "You are the soberest poet we've had here yet," a sec-

for perfection. *One Art* (Farrar Straus Giroux; 668 pages; \$35) offers 541 letters selected from the more than 3,000 assembled by her editor Robert Giroux. The book amounts to a kind of daily autobiography, with none of the reshaping that memory can impose. Bishop loved sending and receiving mail. "I sometimes wish," she wrote while a student at Vassar, "that I had nothing, or little more, to do but write letters to the people who are not here." This sentence proved prophetic; by accident or design, she spent



BISHOP IN 1977: She cherished and often repeated the comment of a university secretary, "You are the soberest poet we've had here yet"

retary at the University of Washington once told her; she cherished the comment and repeated it to others. Bishop's public image seemed serene—photographs taken well into her middle years invariably show small features arranged impassively within a round face—and she grew famous in part for her fastidious reserve about her own work. She allowed only 80 or so of her poems to be published during her lifetime, and their scarcity—not to mention their polished, haunting artistry—made them all the more cherished by her admirers. When she won a Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1956, she wrote a friend, "I'm sure it's never been given for such a miserable quantity of work before."

What can her private correspondence add to the legacy of her poems? A great deal, as it turns out, including the struggles that lay behind Bishop's quest

much of her life in places where her friends were not.

She recounted in one letter telling her hairdresser, "I was an orphan," and the remark, while technically untrue, was emotionally accurate. Her father died eight months after her birth, a loss that drove her mother into a mental home. The child lived with various relatives, including a spell with her mother's family in Nova Scotia.

Bishop knew even before college that she would be a poet, and the task she set herself while at Vassar—"to develop a manner of one's own, to say the most difficult things and to be funny if possible"—remained the same throughout her career. She sought out Marianne Moore as a mentor, but she did not always take the older poet's technical advice: "I'm

afraid I was quite ungracious in that I accepted most of your suggestions but refused some—that seems almost worse than refusing all assistance."

Bishop was blessed and cursed with severe good taste. "I'm rather critical," she told one correspondent with thundering understatement. Her letters regularly registered her dislikes. She called a performance of T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* "a mess." She found "a streak of insensitivity" in the poetry of William Carlos Williams. Not even children's books escaped her opprobrium. After meeting E.B. White, she read a copy of his *Charlotte's Web* and then reported that it is "so awful." She was hardest of all on her own work. Apologizing for her meager output, she begged Moore, "Can you please forgive me and believe that it is really because I want to do something well that I don't do it at all?"

The trimness of Bishop's work and her artistic judgments were not always reflected in her personal affairs. She was a lesbian, but no evidence in these letters suggests that she or her friends were bothered by her preferences; inevitably, though, some of her partners caused her suffering. She spent what she called "the 12 or 13 happiest years of my life" on a Brazilian mountaintop estate owned by Lota de Macedo Soares, a flamboyant architect of Portuguese descent, but the affair ended with Lota's gradual nervous collapse and eventual suicide in Bishop's Manhattan apartment.

A subsequent companion also suffered a breakdown. Despite appearances, Bishop was tempted by alcohol much of her life, a weakness she tried to hide from everyone but her physician. Recounting one of her lapses, she wrote, "I think that when something like that happens I'm so overcome with remorse, before I even get drunk, that that's why I get to feeling so damned sick—and it's much more the mental aftermath than the physical."

After learning of the death of Dylan Thomas, she wrote, "In my own minor way I know enough about drink & destruction."

Giroux took the title *One Art* from a Bishop villanelle published in 1976, three years before her sudden death of a cerebral aneurysm. The poem draws its power from the repeated refrain "The art of losing isn't hard to master." Her letters—so consistently intelligent, entertaining and humane—record the losses that being alive incurs. And when possible, they are funny. ■

