The art of losing

Elizabeth Bishop did not like to give much away about herself. While others were writing confessional poetry, she ensured that she wrote at a distance. Poems which in original drafts mentioned characteristics of a lover were revised, sometimes as many as 17 times, in order to make the final work as polished and as impersonal as possible. She was a lesbian who never publicly admitted to the term, even as younger gay poets in the 1970s embraced it (partners were friends or even a “secretary”). She was an alcoholic who was ashamed of her drinking, but never sought long-term treatment. Poetry was a way of “thinking with one’s feelings”, but those feelings were often obscured, hidden within a parenthesis or written from the perspective of someone very different from herself. This is why she makes a fascinating subject for a biographer.

"A Miracle for Breakfast", the first full-length biography in two decades, ably manages to bring Bishop to life. Megan Marshall, who was taught by the poet at Harvard in 1976, recalls how she could seem prim and aunt-like to her students: “a grimmer, grayer, possibly even smaller woman than I’d remembered…dressed smartly but uncomfortably.” Yet beneath this prim veneer of control was a rich, turbulent personality. Bishop herself was aware of the contrast, writing to one lover while she was teaching at the University of Washington in 1966: “Everyone treats me with such respect and calls me Miss B—and every once in a while I feel a terrible laugh starting down in my chest…how different I am from what they think, I’m sure.”

Bishop’s past was indeed more complicated than many knew, even those close to her. Ms Marshall has had access to a previously unknown trove of letters that Bishop wrote to her psychiatrist and to various lovers, which became available after the death of her executor and last lover, Alice Methfessel, in 2009. These depict an unsettled, unhappy childhood. When Bishop was just three her mother was hospitalised for mental illness. She was brought up by a series of relatives. One uncle molested her and was violent, grabbing her by the hair and...
dangling her over of the railing of a second-floor balcony. “Maybe lots of people have never known real sadists at first hand,” Bishop later wrote to her psychiatrist. “I got to thinking that they [men] were all selfish and inconsiderate and would hurt you if you gave them a chance.”

[B] Bishop’s adult life was no less tumultuous. A man she briefly dated committed suicide a year after she rejected his marriage proposal. He sent her a postcard as a suicide note: “Elizabeth, Go to hell.” One of her lovers managed to crash a car carrying Bishop and one of her friends (whom she was also in love with); Bishop and her lover were fine, but her friend, who had been a painter, lost her arm and could not paint again. Bishop often drank herself into a stupor, starting “the hour before dawn” and sometimes continuing even until she was hospitalised. Her partner of over a decade, Lota de Macedo Soares, a Brazilian self-taught landscape designer, overdosed after a breakdown partly caused by Bishop’s infidelity.

Ms Marshall’s skill prevents this narrative from becoming depressing. The Bishop that emerges from her telling may be at times morose or ashamed of her drinking (wishing, as she wrote to Methfessel, that she could be more like writers who “drink worse than I do, at least badly & all the time, and don’t seem to have any regrets or shame—just write poems about it”). But she also appears vivacious, attractive and full of life. Even the worst heartbreak brought out wonderful poetry, such as her most famous poem, “One Art”, which starts: “The art of losing isn’t hard to master;/so many things seem filled with the intent/to be lost that their loss is no disaster.”

Three relationships in particular illuminate a lighter side to Bishop: her time with Soares in Brazil, which inspired some of her finest work (“Hidden, oh hidden/in the high fog/the house we live in,/beneath the magnetic rock...”); her later years with Methfessel; and her friendship with Robert “Cal” Lowell, the one other writer with whom she immediately felt at ease.

Bishop first met Lowell in 1947 at a dinner party in New York. They stayed in touch for the rest of their lives, writing over 400 letters to one another. Lowell supported her and helped her find grants and postings, and praised her work. He carried around a poem of hers in his wallet as a talisman. They were so different; Lowell wrote hundreds of confessional poems, often quoting from other people’s letters to him.

The relationship between the two is one of the joys of this book. As Ms Marshall puts it: “Elizabeth would always remember the younger poet’s endearingly ‘rumpled’ dark-blue suit and the ‘sad state of his shoes’ on the night of their first meeting, how handsome he was despite needing a haircut, and, most of all, ‘that it was the first time I had ever actually talked with someone about how one writes poetry’.”
Ms Marshall intersperses chapters about Bishop with chapters of memoir, which touch upon her time as Bishop’s student. This gives the biography a sense of authenticity, but it interrupts the flow of the narrative. It also seems in sharp contrast with her intensely private subject. But this is a small price to pay for a biography which at last illuminates one of America’s finest, and most elusive, poets.