

## Ashley Brown: On "Questions of Travel"

The title poem, "Questions of Travel," was first published in 1956, about four years after Elizabeth had taken up residence in Brazil. The tourist has now become the passionate observer and, in a sense, has lost her innocence. The poem is a wonderful mosaic of things that one can see and hear along a Brazilian highway ? say, along the road to Petropolis. (Some of these phenomena are, I fear, doomed as highway culture in Brazil resembles ours more and more.) The mechanic?s wooden clogs "carelessly clacking" over the floor of the filling-station, the bird in its fancy bamboo cage above the broken gasoline pump ? what a pity, says the poet, to have missed these things in all their particularity. And what random historical causes lay behind them? The poem builds up in a seemingly (but only seemingly) casual way to the two formal stanzas in italics at the end, where the traveller asks herself ? "Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?" But she has already answered her question in the poem where, for meat any rate, a whole phase of lost experience has been transmuted into something permanent. The English poet Charles Tomlinson ? said, "for the fact of the matter is, Miss Bishop travels because she likes it, not because she is homeless in the way that Lawrence or Schoenberg were." But is it really necessary to insist on this kind of "radical homelessness?" It seems to me perfectly obvious that Elizabeth Bishop has followed Henry James, Katherine Anne Porter and certain other Americans who have gone out into the world, and these are the names to mention. She knows very well who she is. Again, speaking for myself, I have often wondered about the accidents of history that have made my Brazilian friends different from me ? they come from a country as old and large and diverse as ours, they had slavery twenty-five years after we did, they too are apt to make exaggerated claims. Elizabeth?s poems have more the "feel" of life in Brazil than anything else written by a North American because they undercut the large generalizations that we all have when we approach a subject on this scale.

from Ashley Brown, "Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil," originally published in *Southern Review* 13 (October 1977), rpt. in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 231-232

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