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(ATTENTION EDITORS: This column ends with the words “He is her anchor, she his kite.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

THE LINEBACKER AND THE DERVISH

Lowell's and Bishop's collected letters.

By Michael Hofmann

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Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. Edited by Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$45.00.

This is such a formidably and dramatically and lingeringly wonderful book, it is hard to know where to begin. Well, begin in the manner of the physical geographer and the embarrassed statistician and the value-for-money merchant, with quantity, though that’s absolutely the wrong place. Here, then, are 459 letters, 300 of them not previously published, exchanged over 30 years, between 1947 when the two great poets of late-20th-century America first met—Robert Lowell just 30, Elizabeth Bishop 36, each with one trade book and one round of prizes under their belts—and 1977 when Lowell predeceased his friend by two years; covering, all told, some 900 pages, from Bishop end-papers—one hand-scrawled, one typed—to Lowell end-papers—one in his laborious, also not greatly legible child-print (“I know I’m myself beyond self-help; and at least you can spell”), one typed. The apparatus of footnotes, chronology, and compendious glossary of names—take a bow, Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton—is modest, helpful, and accurate. At this point in our post-epistolary (no joke), post-literary, almost post-alphabetical decline, we would probably receive any collection of letters with a feeling of stupefied wistfulness and a sigh of valediction, but *Words in Air* is way beyond generic. It feels like a necessary and a culminating book, especially for Bishop. To read, it is completely engrossing, to the extent that I feel I have been trekking through it on foot for months, and I don’t know where else I’ve been. “Why, page 351,” I would say. “Letter 229; March 1, 1961. Where did you think?”

But what is it like? How, in fact, do you read it? “I am underlining like Queen Victoria,” Bishop remarks at one stage. How do you filter, assimilate, crunch it down to the space of a review? Its 800 pages of letters—every one of them bearing my ambiguous slashes of delight, interest, controversy, revelation—still left me with eight sheets full of page numbers of my own. It’s like starting with a city, and ending up with a phone book—hardly useful as a redaction. Really, I might as well have held a pencil to the margin and kept it there, for bulk reread.

It’s an epistolary novel—if not a full-blown romance, then at least, at moments, an *amitié amoureuse*. It’s a variation on Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Or it’s an *Entwicklungsroman* in later life, both parties already poets but perhaps more importantly still on the way to becoming poets (echoing the title of David Kalstone’s study), as perhaps one only ever and always *is becoming* a poet. It’s an ideally balanced, ideally complex account of a friendship, a race, a decades-long conspiracy, a dance (say, a tango?). It’s a cocktail of infernal modesty and angelic pride. It’s a further episode in Bishop’s increasingly sweeping posthumous triumph over her more obvious, more ambitious, more square-toed friend. It’s a rat-a-tat-tat ping-pong rally, an artillery exchange, a story told in fireworks, a trapeze show. One can read it for gifts sent up and down the Atlantic, from Lowell’s traditional Northeast seaboard to Bishop’s serendipitously-arrived-at Brazil, where she mostly lived from 1951 on, having arrived on a freighter for a short visit; for projects completed, adapted, revised, abandoned, published, and responded to; for blurbs solicited, struggled with, and delivered to greater or lesser satisfaction; for houses bought and done up and left; for other partners encountered and set down; for visits and time together passionately contrived, put off, and subsequently held up to memory or guiltily swept under the carpet; for gossip and the perennial trade in reputations; for a startlingly unabashed revelation of mutual career aid (“we may be a terrible pair of log-rollers, I don’t know,” writes Bishop in 1965, having asked Lowell for a blurb for *Questions of Travel* after he had asked her for one for *Life Studies*); for loyalty and demurrer, independent thinking and prudent silence, insistent generosity and occasional self-seeking; a longing to submit to the other’s perceived discipline and a desire to offer unconditional admiration; for personal, professional, and public events. One can read it for movements of place, for gaps in time, and discrepancies and disharmonies in feeling or balance; for the dismayed Bishop’s agonized criticism of aspects of two of Lowell’s books, the rather coarse free translations in *Imitations* of 1961 and the use of private letters from his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, in *The Dolphin* of 1973; for various other crises and cruxes: their heady, teasy-flirty mutual discovery of 1947, Bishop’s difficult visit to a near-manic Lowell in Maine in 1957, Lowell’s visit to Brazil and another manic episode in 1962, the death by suicide of Bishop’s companion Lota de Macedo Soares in 1967, Bishop’s uneasy return to Boston (to fill in for Lowell’s absence, if you please), and Lowell’s ultimate shuttling between wives and countries of the late ’70s. It’s social history, comedy of manners, American dissidence, the search for a style. It’s not least a gender myth more astute about men and women than that of Atalanta and Hippolytus (in any case, I always think Atalanta, like Bishop, should have won—*she* should have been provided with the apples, and Hippolytus, the ambitious, distractable male, goofed off in their pursuit, rather than the other way round). He is her anchor, she his kite.

Excerpted from “The Linebacker and the Dervish,” originally published in the January 2009 issue of *Poetry* magazine. Michael Hofmann’s most recent collection of poetry, *Selected Poems* (April 2009), was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. He is currently working on translations of Gottfried Benn. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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