By the time Elizabeth Bishop settled into her apartment on the Boston waterfront, in recently refurbished Lewis Wharf, it was 1974. She was 63 years old and had lived in places as disparate as Nova Scotia, New York, Key West, Paris, Mexico, Brazil, San Francisco, and Seattle. But the Worcester, Massachusetts, native was more a New Englander than anything else, and thus it is not surprising that she would spend the final years of her life in Boston and Cambridge, where she taught at Harvard from 1970 to 1977. “My compass always points North,” she wrote in an intimate poem not meant for publication. North and South, the title of her first book, maps the great rift between her intellectual and emotional roots in the Northeast and the blossoming of her talent and sexuality in the tropics.

Having lost her father before she was a year old and watched her mother descend into madness, the five-year-old Bishop clung to her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia. But she was soon uprooted by her paternal grandparents in Worcester and forced to return to the United States. Thus began a life of displacement during which she moved from one temporary situation to another in Worcester, Revere, and Walnut Hill, Massachusetts (where she attended private school), to Vassar College, and then New York City, Europe, and, for a lengthier time, Key West.

Her deep-rooted sense of belonging nowhere seems to have contributed to the serious allergies and alcoholism that plagued her all her life. Against the vertigo of continual upheavals, Bishop deployed the literary talents that would eventually make her one of the most highly respected American poets of the twentieth century. In the segment on Bishop in the 1988 PBS series Voices and Visions, the novelist Mary McCarthy celebrated her wit, reciting from memory an early poem Bishop had composed at Vassar when she lived next door to the bathroom in her dormitory: “Ladies and Gents, Ladies and Gents, flushing away your excrements. I sit and hear beyond the wall the sad continual waterfall...”

Wit secured her when life left her hanging. Out of a deep sense of the limited nature of her uncertain existence, she created “The Gentleman of Shalott,” whose bisected body must be doubled by placing it next to a mirror. If the glass slips, he’s lost, but while it remains in place, he can function like a whole person, and there’s something wonderful—she uses the word “exhilarating”—about “that sense of constant re-adjustment. / He wishes to be quoted as saying at present: ‘Half is enough.’”

Financial constraints led her to depend on and often live with others; in this peripatetic life, Bishop became a poet of geography and travel. “More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors,” she wrote in “The Map,” the poem that opens her Complete Poems: 1927-1979. In “Questions of Travel,” written about her fateful trip to Brazil in 1951 that resulted in a stay of more than 15 years, she muses about the incessant urge to rush off to faraway places.

“But surely it would have been a pity,” she reflects, not to have experienced these different views (trees, churches, “the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages”), the sound of these wooden clogs “carelessly clacking” on a filling-station floor. “And never to have had to listen to rain so much like politicians’ speeches: / two hours of unrelenting oratory / and then a sudden golden silence...” The poem ends with speculations about the decisions we make to explore otherness. But the question of travel she poses in italics in the final lines is double-edged.

“Should we have stayed at home, wherever that may be?”

In the beautiful houses of her Brazilian lover and companion Lota de Macedo Soares, Bishop did experience a kind of respite from the sense of homelessness, a respite that allowed her to return to the painful themes of her childhood in both poetry and prose. She won fellowships and prizes, including the Pulitzer, was awarded honorary degrees and critical accolades. Yet nothing could quite ease the burden of losses (including the loss of Lota herself...
to suicide in 1967) that she addresses in her most famous poem, “One Art,” a villanelle that begins, “The art of losing isn’t hard to master” and ends, “though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster”—a line that calls all that has gone before into question.

Given the compass of her imagination and her soul, it now seems inevitable that she would return to New England in the end, taking up residence first at 60 Brattle Street in Cambridge, and then at Lewis Wharf, summering at North Haven Island in Maine, and spending occasional weekends at the shore in Duxbury. Her last book, Geography III, with its many poems about her past, was her best. In its willingness to address more personal subjects, it shows the influence of her friend and Harvard colleague Robert Lowell. Yet Bishop remained at heart a less theatrical, more reticent character. Though Lowell belonged to an old Boston family, it was she, ironically, who came to seem more characteristic of New England. “The rackety, icy, offshore wind” she describes in “The End of March” had blown her far from her birthplace, but she had come back in time to see its merits before she died.

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Above: A photograph of Elizabeth Bishop taken in 1954. The poet was also an amateur painter, working primarily in watercolor and gouache. She often depicted the places where she lived or visited, as can be seen in the book Exchanging Hats, a compilation of her artwork edited and introduced by William Benton. Both Cabin with a Porthole (opposite) and Brazilian Landscape (above) are undated; their present whereabouts are unknown.