

Poet Robert Pinsky on Elizabeth Bishop



This past fall, Vassar held a conference to celebrate what would have been the 100th birthday of the late poet Elizabeth Bishop '34. The keynote speaker, former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, read this poem, which he had written as a special tribute to Vassar and Bishop.

ALMA MATER 150th Anniversary, Vassar College

Change is unquenchable, and yet change is never completed:
Not in the convolutions of nature, not in the matrix of culture

With its migrations, pidgins, dialects, innovations
Gaffes, throwbacks, returns, shifts, radical departures:

Matthew Vassar born in England, raised near Poughkeepsie.
Apprenticed to a tanner, he ran away and became a brewer.

Change is perpetual and yet never total, something survives
Inherited in the genome or in certain vestigial family customs:

Mexican families in Arizona who avoid pork for reasons forgotten
Since the Inquisition, but their cells remember, encoding it.

The Past and the Future are invisible and eternal—in comparison
The Present is a visible hairline void between them, without dimension.

Imagine those long-ago Sephardic and Aztec ancestors trying
To imagine that future Arizona or me thinking of them and Vassar.

In the Past, apprentice to a tanner; in the Future, a wealthy brewer;
In any pure Present Moment—nothing, neither Buddhist nor Baptist.

Matthew Vassar's niece Lydia Booth was a mathematics teacher
Who gave her uncle the idea of the Vassar Female College.

Motherhood is an immutable fact, clear and demonstrable.
Fatherhood is only a theory: anthropological laughter.

Some cultures honor the inherited role of maternal uncle.
Lydia was a step-daughter of Matthew Vassar's sister.

Matrix of bloodlines, maternal matrix of notions and memory.
Change is inevitable, persistent, visible yet unthinkable.

Lydia's idea, Baptist women studying geometry and algebra,
Decayed into gestures of inherited privilege, yet it rose in ambition.

Change has inapprehensible channels and no terminus: a Hispanic
Boy from Arizona with Ashkenazi chromosomes might attend Vassar

And be proud of his fellow-graduate, Elizabeth Bishop—because,
As the Latin formality says, they were fed by the same mother.

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124 Raymond Ave Box 647

Poughkeepsie, N.Y 12604-0009

Phone (845) 437-5447

Fax (845) 437-7239