Elizabeth Bishop

The Complete Poems

1927-1979

The Map

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
drawing it unperturbed around itself?
Along the fine tan sandy shelf
is the land tugging at the sea from under?

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.
Labrador’s yellow, where the moony Eskimo
has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,
or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.
The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
—the printer here experiencing the same excitement
as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.
These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger
like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,
lending the land their waves’ own conformation:
and Norway’s hare runs south in agitation,
profiles investigate the sea, where land is.
Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?
—What suits the character or the native waters best.
Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West.
More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors.
Florida

The state with the prettiest name,
the state that floats in brackish water,
held together by mangrove roots
that bear while living oysters in clusters,
and when dead strewn white swamps with skeletons,
dotted as if bombarded, with green hummocks
like ancient cannon-balls sprouting grass.
The state full of long S-shaped birds, blue and white,
and unseen hysterical birds who rush up the scale
every time in a tantrum.
Tanager embarrassed by their flashiness,
and pelicans whose delight it is to clown;
who coast for fun on the strong tidal currents
in and out among the mangrove islands
and stand on the sand-bars drying their damp gold wings
on sun-lit evenings.
Enormous turtles, helpless and mild,
die and leave their barnacled shells on the beaches,
and their large white skulls with round eye-sockets
twice the size of a man's.
The palm trees clatter in the stiff breeze
like the bills of the pelicans. The tropical rain comes down
to freshen the tide-looped strings of fading shells:
Job's Tear, the Chinese Alphabet, the scarce Junonia,
parti-colored pectins and Ladies' Ears,
arranged as on a gray rag of rotted calico,
the buried Indian Princess's skirt:
with these the monotonous, endless, sagging coast-line
is delicately ornamented.

Thirty or more buzzards are drifting down, down, down,
over something they have spotted in the swamp,
in circles like stirred-up flakes of sediment
sinking through water.
Smoke from woods-fires filters fine blue solvents.

On stumps and dead trees the chirping is like black velvet.
The mosquitoes
go hunting to the tune of their ferocious obligatos.
After dark, the fireflies map the heavens in the marsh
until the moon rises.
Cold white, not bright, the moonlight is coarse-meshed,
and the careless, corrupt state is all black specks
too far apart, and ugly whites; the poorest
post-card of itself.
After dark, the pools seem to have slipped away.
The alligator, who has five distinct calls:
friendliness, love, mating, war, and a warning—
whimpers and speaks in the throat
of the Indian Princess.
Jerónimo's House

My house, my fairy
  palace, is
of perishable
  clapboards with
three rooms in all,
  my gray wasps' nest
of chewed-up paper
  glued with spit.

My home, my love-nest,
  is endowed
with a veranda
  of wooden lace,
adorned with ferns
  planted in sponges,
and the front room
  with red and green

left-over Christmas
  decorations
looped from the corners
  to the middle
above my little
  center table
of woven wicker
  painted blue,

and four blue chairs
  and an affair
for the smallest baby
  with a tray
with ten big beads.
  Then on the walls
two palm-leaf fans
  and a calendar
  and on the table
one fried fish
  spattered with burning
scarlet sauce,
a little dish
  of hominy grits
and four pink tissue-
  paper roses.

Also I have
  hung on a hook,
an old French horn
  repainted with
aluminum paint.
  I play each year
in the parade
  for José Martí.

At night you'd think
  my house abandoned.
Come closer. You
  can see and hear
the writing-paper
  lines of light
and the voices of
  my radio

singing flamencos
  in between
the lottery numbers.
  When I move
I take these things,
  not much more, from
my shelter from
  the hurricane.

Roosters

At four o'clock
  in the gun-metal blue dark
we hear the first crow of the first cock

just below
the gun-metal blue window
and immediately there is an echo

off in the distance,
then one from the backyard fence,
then one, with horrible insistence,

grates like a wet match
from the broccoli patch,
  flares, and all over town begins to catch.

Cries galore
come from the water-closet door,
from the dropping-plastered henhouse floor,

where in the blue blur
their rustling wives admire,
the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare

with stupid eyes
while from their beaks there rise
the uncontrolled, traditional cries.

Deep from protruding chests
in green-gold medals dressed,
planned to command and terrorize the rest,

the many wives
who lead hens' lives
of being courted and despised;
deep from raw throats
a senseless order floats
all over town. A rooster gloats
over our beds
from rusty iron sheds
and fences made from old bedsteads,
over our churches
where the tin rooster perches,
over our little wooden northern houses,
making sallies
from all the muddy alleys,
marking out maps like Rand McNally's:
glass-headed pins,
oil-golds and copper greens,
anthracite blues, alizarins,
each one an active
displacement in perspective;
each screaming, "This is where I live!"

Each screaming
"Get up! Stop dreaming!"
Roosters, what are you projecting?

You, whom the Greeks elected
to shoot at on a post, who struggled
when sacrificed, you whom they labeled

"Very combative . . ."
what right have you to give
commands and tell us how to live,
cry "Here!" and "Here!"
and wake us here where are
unwanted love, conceit and war?

The crown of red
set on your little head
is charged with all your fighting blood.

Yes, that ex crescence
makes a most virile presence,
plus all that vulgar beauty of iridescence.

Now in mid-air
by twos they fight each other.
Down comes a first flame-feather,

and one is flying,
with raging heroism defying
even the sensation of dying.

And one has fallen,
but still above the town
his torn-out, bloodied feathers drift down;

and what he sung
no matter. He is flung
on the gray ash-heap, lies in dung

with his dead wives
with open, bloody eyes,
while those metallic feathers oxidize.

St. Peter's sin
was worse than that of Magdalen
whose sin was of the flesh alone;

of spirit, Peter's,
falling, beneath the flares,
among the "servants and officers."

Old holy sculpture
could set it all together
in one small scene, past and future:
Christ stands amazed,
Peter, two fingers raised
to surprised lips, both as if dazed.

But in between
a little cock is seen
carved on a dim column in the travertine,

explained by *gallus canit*;
*flet Petrus* underneath it.
There is inescapable hope, the pivot;

yes, and there Peter’s tears
run down our chanticleer’s
sides and gem his spurs.

Tear-encrusted thick
as a medieval relic
he waits. Poor Peter, heart-sick,

still cannot guess
those cock-a-doodles yet might bless,
his dreadful rooster come to mean forgiveness,

a new weathervane
on basilica and barn,
and that outside the Lateran

there would always be
a bronze cock on a porphyry
pillar so the people and the Pope might see

that even the Prince
of the Apostles long since
had been forgiven, and to convince

all the assembly
that “Deny deny deny”
is not all the roosters cry.

In the morning
a low light is floating
in the backyard, and gilding

from underneath
the broccoli, leaf by leaf;
how could the night have come to grief?

gilding the tiny
floating swallow’s belly
and lines of pink cloud in the sky,

the day’s preamble
like wandering lines in marble.
The cocks are now almost inaudible.

The sun climbs in,
following “to see the end,”
faithful as enemy, or friend.
Seascape

This celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels, flying as high as they want and as far as they want sidewise in tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections; the whole region, from the highest heron down to the weightless mangrove island with bright green leaves edged neatly with bird-droppings like illumination in silver, and down to the suggestively Gothic arches of the mangrove roots and the beautiful pea-green back-pasture where occasionally a fish jumps, like a wild-flower in an ornamental spray of spray; this cartoon by Raphael for a tapestry for a Pope: it does look like heaven.
But a skeletal lighthouse standing there in black and white clerical dress, who lives on his nerves, thinks he knows better.
He thinks that hell rages below his iron feet, that that is why the shallow water is so warm, and he knows that heaven is not like this.
Heaven is not like flying or swimming, but has something to do with blackness and a strong glare and when it gets dark he will remember something strongly worded to say on the subject.

Little Exercise

For Thomas Edwards Wanning

Think of the storm roaming the sky uneasily like a dog looking for a place to sleep in, listen to it growling.

Think how they must look now, the mangrove keys lying out there unresponsive to the lightning in dark, coarse-fibred families,
where occasionally a heron may undo his head, shake up his feathers, make an uncertain comment when the surrounding water shines.

Think of the boulevard and the little palm trees all stuck in rows, suddenly revealed as fistfuls of limp fish-skeletons.

It is raining there. The boulevard and its broken sidewalks with weeds in every crack are relieved to be wet, the sea to be freshened.

Now the storm goes away again in a series of small, badly lit battle-scenes, each in “Another part of the field.”

Think of someone sleeping in the bottom of a row-boat tied to a mangrove root or the pile of a bridge; think of him as uninjured, barely disturbed.
The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes

which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.

They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.
Cootchie

Cootchie, Miss Lula's servant, lies in marl,  
black into white she went  
    below the surface of the coral-reef.  
Her life was spent  
    in caring for Miss Lula, who is deaf,  
eating her dinner off the kitchen sink  
while Lula ate hers off the kitchen table.  
The skies were egg-white for the funeral  
and the faces sable.

Tonight the moonlight will alleviate  
the melting of the pink wax roses  
    planted in tin cans filled with sand  
placed in a line to mark Miss Lula's losses;  
    but who will shout and make her understand?  
Searching the land and sea for someone else,  
the lighthouse will discover Cootchie's grave  
and dismiss all as trivial; the sea, desperate,  
    will proffer wave after wave.
The Bight

[On my birthday]

At low tide like this how sheer the water is. White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches. Absorbing, rather than being absorbed, the water in the bight doesn't wet anything, the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible. One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire one could probably hear it turning to marimba music. The little ochre dredge at work off the end of the dock already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves. The birds are outsized. Pelicans crash into this peculiar gas unnecessarily hard, it seems to me, like pickaxes, rarely coming up with anything to show for it, and going off with humorous elbowings. Black-and-white man-of-war birds soar on impalpable drafts and open their tails like scissors on the curves or tense them like wishbones, till they tremble. The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in with the obliging air of retrievers, bristling with jackstraw gaffs and hooks and decorated with bobbles of sponges. There is a fence of chicken wire along the dock where, glinting like little plowshares, the blue-gray shark tails are hung up to dry for the Chinese-restaurant trade. Some of the little white boats are still piled up against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in, and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm, like torn-open, unanswered letters. The bight is littered with old correspondences. Click. Click. Goes the dredge,

and brings up a dripping jawful of marl. All the untidy activity continues, awful but cheerful.