

Elizabeth Bishop

The Complete Poems

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Farrar · Straus · Giroux

N E W Y O R K

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 strew 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.  
Tanagers 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 charring is like black velvet.  
The mosquitoes  
go hunting to the tune of their ferocious obbligator.  
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 excrescence  
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 ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock  
already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves.  
The birds are outsize. 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.