Classic Poetry Series

Elizabeth Bishop

- 69 poems -

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Elizabeth Bishop (8 February 1911 – 6 October 1979)

Elizabeth Bishop was an American poet and short-story writer. She was the Poet Laureate of the United States from 1949 to 1950, a Pulitzer Prize winner in 1956 and a National Book Award Winner for Poetry in 1970. Elizabeth Bishop House is an artists' retreat in Great Village, Nova Scotia dedicated to her memory. She is considered one of the most important and distinguished American poets of the 20th century.

Early Years

Elizabeth Bishop, an only child, was born in Worcester, Massachusetts. After her father, a successful builder, died when she was eight months old, Bishop’s mother became mentally ill and was institutionalized in 1916. (Bishop wrote about the time of her mother's struggles in her short story "In The Village.") Effectively orphaned during her very early childhood, she lived with her grandparents on a farm in Great Village, Nova Scotia, a period she also referenced in her writing. This was also where she developed into a first-class fisherwoman. Bishop's mother remained in an asylum until her death in 1934, and the two were never reunited.

Later in childhood, Bishop's paternal family gained custody, and she was removed from the care of her grandparents and moved in with her father's wealthier family in Worcester, Massachusetts. However, Bishop was unhappy in Worcester, and her separation from her grandparents made her lonely. While she was living in Worcester, she developed chronic asthma, from which she suffered for the rest of her life. Her time in Worcester is briefly chronicled in her poem "In The Waiting Room."

Bishop boarded at the Walnut Hill School in Natick, Massachusetts, where she studied music. At the school her first poems were published by her friend Frani Blough in a student magazine. Then she entered Vassar College in the fall of 1929, shortly before the stock market crash, planning to be a composer. She gave up music because of a terror of performance and switched to English where she took courses including 16th and 17th century literature and the novel. Bishop published her work in her senior year in The Magazine (based in California) and 1933, she co-founded Con Spirito, a rebel literary magazine at Vassar, with writer Mary McCarthy (one year her senior), Margaret Miller, and the sisters Eunice and Eleanor Clark. Bishop graduated in 1934.

Influences

Bishop was greatly influenced by the poet Marianne Moore to whom she was introduced by a librarian at Vassar in 1934. Moore took a keen interest in

Bishop’s work, and at one point Moore dissuaded Bishop from attending Cornell Medical School, in which the poet had briefly enrolled herself after moving to New York City following her Vassar graduation. It was four years before Bishop addressed "Dear Miss Moore" as "Dear Marianne," and only then at the elder poet’s invitation. The friendship between the two women, memorialized by an extensive correspondence (see One Art), endured until Moore's death in 1972. Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" (1955) contains allusions on several levels to Moore's 1924 poem "A Grave."

She was introduced to Robert Lowell by Randall Jarrell in 1947 and they became great friends, mostly through their written correspondence, until Lowell's death in 1977. After his death, she wrote, "our friendship, [which was] often kept alive through years of separation only by letters, remained constant and affectionate, and I shall always be deeply grateful for it". They also both influenced each other's poetry. Lowell cited Bishop's influence on his poem "Skunk Hour" which he said, "[was] modeled on Miss Bishop's 'The Armadillo.'" Also, his poem "The Scream" is "derived from...Bishop's story In the Village." "North Haven," one of the last poems she published during her lifetime, was written in memory of Lowell in 1978.

Travel and Success

Bishop had an independent income in early adulthood as a result of an inheritance from her deceased father that did not run out until the end of her life. With this inheritance, Bishop was able to travel widely without worrying about employment and lived in many cities and countries which are described in her poems. She lived in France for several years in the mid-1930s with a friend she knew at Vassar, Louise Crane, who was a paper-manufacturing heiress. In 1938, Bishop purchased a house with Crane at 624 White Street in Key West, Florida. While living there Bishop made the acquaintance of Pauline Pfeiffer Hemingway, who had divorced Ernest Hemingway in 1940.

In 1949 to 1950, she was Consultant in Poetry for the Library of Congress, and lived at Bertha Looker's Boardinghouse, 1312 30th Street Northwest, Washington, D.C., in Georgetown. In 1946, Marianne Moore suggested Bishop for the Houghton Mifflin Prize for poetry, which Bishop won. Her first book, North & South, was published in 1,000 copies. The book prompted the literary critic Randall Jarrell to write that “all her poems have written underneath, 'I have seen it,'" referring to Bishop's talent for vivid description.

Upon receiving a substantial $2,500 traveling fellowship from Bryn Mawr College in 1951, Bishop set off to circumnavigate South America by boat. Arriving in Santos, Brazil in November of that year, Bishop expected to stay two weeks but stayed fifteen years. She lived in Pétropolis with architect Lota de Macedo Soares, descended from a prominent and notable political family. While living in Brazil, in 1956 Bishop received the Pulitzer Prize for a collection of poetry, Poems: North & South/A Cold Spring, which combined her first two books. Although Bishop was not forthcoming about details of her romance with Soares, much of their relationship was documented in Bishop's extensive correspondence with Samuel Ashley Brown. However, in its later years, the relationship deteriorated, becoming volatile and tempestuous, marked by bouts of depression, tantrums and alcoholism.

It was during her time in Brazil that Elizabeth Bishop became increasingly interested in the languages and literatures of Latin America. She was influenced by South and Central American poets, including the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, as well as the Brazilian poets João Cabral de Melo Neto and Carlos Drummond de Andrade and translated their work into English. Regarding de Andrade, she said, "I didn't know him at all. He's supposed to be very shy. I'm supposed to be very shy. We've met once — on the sidewalk at night. We had just come out of the same restaurant, and he kissed my hand politely when we were introduced." After Soares took her own life in 1967 Bishop spent more time in the US.

Literary Style and Identity

Bishop did not see herself as a "lesbian poet" or as a "female poet." Although she still considered herself to be "a strong feminist," she only wanted to be judged based on the quality of her writing and not on her gender or sexual orientation. Also, where some of her notable contemporaries like Robert Lowell and John Berryman made the intimate, often sordid details of their personal lives an important part of their poetry, Bishop avoided this practice altogether. For instance, like Berryman, Bishop struggled with alcoholism and depression throughout her adult life; but Bishop never wrote about this struggle (whereas Berryman made his alcoholism and depression a focal point in his dream song poems).

In contrast to this confessional style involving large amounts of self-exposure, Bishop's style of writing, though it sometimes involved sparse details from her personal life, was known for its highly detailed and objective, distant point of view and for its reticence on the sordid subject matter that obsessed her contemporaries. In contrast to a poet like Lowell, when Bishop wrote about details and people from her own life (as she did in her story about her childhood and her mentally unstable mother in "In the Village"), she always used discretion.

Although she was generally supportive of the "confessional" style of her friend, Robert Lowell, she drew the line at Lowell's highly controversial book The Dolphin (1973), in which he used and altered private letters from his ex-wife, Elizabeth Hardwick (whom he'd recently divorced after 23 years of marriage), as material for his poems. In a letter to Lowell, dated March 21, 1972, Bishop strongly urged him against publishing the book, writing, "One can use one's life as material [for poems]--one does anyway—but these letters—aren't you violating a trust? IF you were given permission—IF you hadn't changed them. . .etc. But art just isn't worth that much."

Later Career

In addition to winning the Pulitzer Prize, Bishop won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award as well as two Guggenheim Fellowships and an Ingram Merrill Foundation grant. In 1976, she became the first woman to receive the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, and remains the only American to be awarded that prize.

Bishop lectured in higher education for a number of years starting in the 1970s when her inheritance began to run out. For a short time she taught at the University of Washington, before teaching at Harvard University for seven years. She often spent her summers in her summer house in the island community of North Haven, Maine. She taught at New York University, before finishing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She commented "I don’t think I believe in writing courses at all… It’s true, children sometimes write wonderful things, paint wonderful pictures, but I think they should be discouraged."

In 1971 Bishop began a relationship with Alice Methfessel. Never a prolific writer, Bishop noted that she would begin many projects and leave them unfinished. She published her last book in 1976, Geography III. Three years later, she died of a cerebral aneurysm in her apartment at Lewis Wharf, Boston. She is buried in Hope Cemetery in Worcester, Massachusetts. Alice Methfessel was her literary executor.

Awards and Honors

1945: Houghton Mifflin Poetry Prize Fellowship
1947: Guggenheim Fellowship
1949: Appointed Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress
1950: American Academy of Arts and Letters Award
1951: Lucy Martin Donelly Fellowship (awarded by Bryn Mawr College)
1953: Shelley Memorial Award
1954: Elected to lifetime membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters
1956: Pulitzer Prize for Poetry
1960: Chapelbrook Foundation Award

1964: Academy of American Poets Fellowship
1968: Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
1968: Ingram-Merrill Foundation Grant
1969: National Book Award
1969: The Order of the Rio Branco (awarded by the Brazilian government)
1974: Harriet Monroe Poetry Award
1976: Books Abroad/Neustadt International Prize
1976: Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters
1977: National Book Critics Circle Award
1978: Guggenheim Fellowship

Works:

Poetry Collections

North & South (Houghton Mifflin, 1946)
Poems: North & South/A Cold Spring (Houghton Mifflin, 1955)
A Cold Spring (Houghton Mifflin, 1956)
Questions of Travel (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965)
The Complete Poems (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969)
Geography III, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976)
The Complete Poems: 1927–1979 (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983)
Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments by Elizabeth Bishop ed. Alice Quinn, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006)

Other Works

The Diary of Helena Morley, by Alice Brant, translated and with an Introduction by Elizabeth Bishop, (Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1957)
The Ballad of the Burglar of Babylon (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968)
An Anthology of Twentieth Century Brazilian Poetry edited by Elizabeth Bishop and Emanuel Brasil, (Wesleyan University Press (1972)
The Collected Prose (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984)
One Art: Letters selected and edited by Robert Giroux, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994)
Exchanging Hats: Elizabeth Bishop Paintings, edited and with an Introduction by William Benton, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996)
Poems, Prose and Letters Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz, eds. (New York: Library of America, 2008)
Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, ed. Thomas Travisano, Saskia Hamilton (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2008)
Conversations with Elizabeth Bishop. George Monteiro Ed. (University Press of Mississippi 1996)

A Miracle for Breakfast

At six o'clock we were waiting for coffee,
waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb
that was going to be served from a certain balcony
--like kings of old, or like a miracle.
It was still dark. One foot of the sun
steadied itself on a long ripple in the river.

The first ferry of the day had just crossed the river.
It was so cold we hoped that the coffee
would be very hot, seeing that the sun
was not going to warm us; and that the crumb
would be a loaf each, buttered, by a miracle.
At seven a man stepped out on the balcony.

He stood for a minute alone on the balcony
looking over our heads toward the river.
A servant handed him the makings of a miracle,
consisting of one lone cup of coffee
and one roll, which he proceeded to crumb,
his head, so to speak, in the clouds--along with the sun.

Was the man crazy? What under the sun
was he trying to do, up there on his balcony!
Each man received one rather hard crumb,
which some flicked scornfully into the river,
and, in a cup, one drop of the coffee.
Some of us stood around, waiting for the miracle.

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.
A beautiful villa stood in the sun
and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.
In front, a baroque white plaster balcony
added by birds, who nest along the river,
--I saw it with one eye close to the crumb--

and galleries and marble chambers. My crumb
my mansion, made for me by a miracle,
through ages, by insects, birds, and the river
working the stone. Every day, in the sun,
at breakfast time I sit on my balcony
with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee.

We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.
A window across the river caught the sun
as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.

Elizabeth Bishop

A Prodigal

The brown enormous odor he lived by
was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,
for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.
Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts,
the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare--
even to the sow that always ate her young--
till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head.
But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts
(he hid the pints behind the two-by-fours),
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.
And then he thought he almost might endure
his exile yet another year or more.

But evenings the first star came to warn.
The farmer whom he worked for came at dark
to shut the cows and horses in the barn
beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,
with pitchforks, faint forked lightnings, catching light,
safe and companionable as in the Ark.
The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.
The lantern--like the sun, going away--
laid on the mud a pacing aureole.
Carrying a bucket along a slimy board,
he felt the bats' uncertain staggering flight,
his shuddering insights, beyond his control,
touching him. But it took him a long time
finally to make up his mind to go home.

Elizabeth Bishop

A Summer's Dream

To the sagging wharf
few ships could come.
The population numbered
two giants, an idiot, a dwarf,

a gentle storekeeper
asleep behind his counter,
and our kind landlady—
the dwarf was her dressmaker.

The idiot could be beguiled
by picking blackberries,
but then threw them away.
The shrunken seamstress smiled.

By the sea, lying
blue as a mackerel,
our boarding house was streaked
as though it had been crying.

Extraordinary geraniums
crowded the front windows,
the floors glittered with
assorted linoleums.

Every night we listened
for a horned owl.
In the horned lamp flame,
the wallpaper glistened.

The giant with the stammer
was the landlady's son,
grumbling on the stairs
over an old grammar.

He was morose,
but she was cheerful.
The bedroom was cold,
the feather bed close.

We were awakened in the dark by
the somnambulist brook
nearing the sea,
still dreaming audibly.

Elizabeth Bishop

Anaphora

Each day with so much ceremony
begins, with birds, with bells,
with whistles from a factory;
such white-gold skies our eyes
first open on, such brilliant walls
that for a moment we wonder
"Where is the music coming from, the energy?
The day was meant for what ineffable creature
we must have missed?" Oh promptly he
appears and takes his earthly nature
   instantly, instantly falls
   victim of long intrigue,
   assuming memory and mortal
   mortal fatigue.

More slowly falling into sight
and showering into stippled faces,
darkening, condensing all his light;
in spite of all the dreaming
squandered upon him with that look,
suffers our uses and abuses,
sinks through the drift of bodies,
sinks through the drift of vlasses
to evening to the beggar in the park
who, weary, without lamp or book
   prepares stupendous studies:
   the fiery event
   of every day in endless
   endless assent.

Elizabeth Bishop

Argument

Days that cannot bring you near
or will not,
Distance trying to appear
something more obstinate,
argue argue argue with me
endlessly
neither proving you less wanted nor less dear.

Distance: Remember all that land
beneath the plane;
that coastline
of dim beaches deep in sand
stretching indistinguishably
all the way,
all the way to where my reasons end?

Days: And think
of all those cluttered instruments,
one to a fact,
canceling each other's experience;
how they were
like some hideous calendar
"Compliments of Never & Forever, Inc."

The intimidating sound
of these voices
we must separately find
can and shall be vanquished:
Days and Distance disarrayed again
and gone...

Elizabeth Bishop

Arrival At Santos

Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
impractically shaped and--who knows?--self-pitying mountains,
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,

with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
and some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
and a better life, and complete comprehension
of both at last, and immediately,
after eighteen days of suspension?

Finish your breakfast. The tender is coming,
a strange and ancient craft, flying a strange and brilliant rag.
So that's the flag. I never saw it before.
I somehow never thought of there being a flag,

but of course there was, all along. And coins, I presume,
and paper money; they remain to be seen.
And gingerly now we climb down the ladder backward,
myself and a fellow passenger named Miss Breen,

descending into the midst of twenty-six freighters
waiting to be loaded with green coffee beaus.
Please, boy, do be more careful with that boat hook!
Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's

skirt! There! Miss Breen is about seventy,
a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,
with beautiful bright blue eyes and a kind expression.
Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall

s, New York. There. We are settled.
The customs officials will speak English, we hope,
and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.
Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap,

but they seldom seem to care what impression they make,
or, like this, only attempt, since it does not matter,
the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps--
wasting away like the former, slipping the way the latter

do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat,
either because the glue here is very inferior
or because of the heat. We leave Santos at once;
we are driving to the interior.

Elizabeth Bishop

At the Fishhouses

Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.
The air smells so strong of codfish
it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.
The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
to storerooms in the gables
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
among the wild jagged rocks,
is of an apparent translucence
like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
growing on their shoreward walls.
The big fish tubs are completely lined
with layers of beautiful herring scales
and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
with small iridescent flies crawling on them.
Up on the little slope behind the houses,
set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,
is an ancient wooden capstan,
cracked, with two long bleached handles
and some melancholy stains, like dried blood,
where the ironwork has rusted.
The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
He was a friend of my grandfather.
We talk of the decline in the population
and of codfish and herring
while he waits for a herring boat to come in.
There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.
He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,
from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,
the blade of which is almost worn away.

Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water, thin silver
tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.

He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."
He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment.
Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
the clear gray icy water . . . Back, behind us,
the dignified tall firs begin.
Bluish, associating with their shadows,
a million Christmas trees stand
waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

Elizabeth Bishop

Cape Breton

Out on the high "bird islands," Ciboux and Hertford,
the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand
with their backs to the mainland
in solemn, uneven lines along the cliff's brown grass-frayed edge,
while the few sheep pastured there go "Baaa, baaa."
(Sometimes, frightened by aeroplanes, they stampede
and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks.)
The silken water is weaving and weaving,
disappearing under the mist equally in all directions,
lifted and penetrated now and then
by one shag's dripping serpent-neck,
and somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse,
rapid but unurgent, of a motor boat.

The same mist hangs in thin layers
among the valleys and gorges of the mainland
like rotting snow-ice sucked away
almost to spirit; the ghosts of glaciers drift
among those folds and folds of fir: spruce and hackmatack--
dull, dead, deep pea-cock colors,
each riser distinguished from the next
by an irregular nervous saw-tooth edge,
alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view.

The wild road clambers along the brink of the coast.
On it stand occasional small yellow bulldozers,
but without their drivers, because today is Sunday.
The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills
like lost quartz arrowheads.
The road appears to have been abandoned.
Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned,
unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
where we cannot see,
where deep lakes are reputed to be,
and disused trails and mountains of rock
and miles of burnt forests, standing in gray scratches
like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones--
and these regions now have little to say for themselves
except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward
freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing
in brown-wet, fine torn fish-nets.

A small bus comes along, in up-and-down rushes,
packed with people, even to its step.
(On weekdays with groceries, spare automobile parts, and pump parts,
but today only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock coat on a
hanger.)
It passes the closed roadside stand, the closed schoolhouse,
where today no flag is flying
from the rough-adzed pole topped with a white china doorknob.
It stops, and a man carrying a bay gets off,
climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,

which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
to his invisible house beside the water.

The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.
The thin mist follows
the white mutations of its dream;
an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.

Elizabeth Bishop

Casabianca

Love's the boy stood on the burning deck
trying to recite `The boy stood on
the burning deck.' Love's the son
stood stammering elocution
while the poor ship in flames went down.

Love's the obstinate boy, the ship,
even the swimming sailors, who
would like a schoolroom platform, too,
or an excuse to stay
on deck. And love's the burning boy.

Elizabeth Bishop

Chemin De Fer

Alone on the railroad track
  I walked with pounding heart.
The ties were too close together
  or maybe too far apart.

The scenery was impoverished:
  scrub-pine and oak; beyond
its mingled gray-green foliage
  I saw the little pond

where the dirty old hermit lives,
  lie like an old tear
holding onto its injuries
  lucidly year after year.

The hermit shot off his shot-gun
  and the tree by his cabin shook.
Over the pond went a ripple
  The pet hen went chook-chook.

"Love should be put into action!"
  screamed the old hermit.
Across the pond an echo
  tried and tried to confirm it.

Elizabeth Bishop

Cirque D'Hiver

Across the floor flits the mechanical toy,
fit for a king of several centuries back.
A little circus horse with real white hair.
His eyes are glossy black.
He bears a little dancer on his back.

She stands upon her toes and turns and turns.
A slanting spray of artificial roses
is stitched across her skirt and tinsel bodice.
Above her head she poses
another spray of artificial roses.

His mane and tail are straight from Chirico.
He has a formal, melancholy soul.
He feels her pink toes dangle toward his back
along the little pole
that pierces both her body and her soul

and goes through his, and reappears below,
under his belly, as a big tin key.
He canters three steps, then he makes a bow,
canters again, bows on one knee,
canters, then clicks and stops, and looks at me.

The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.
He is the more intelligent by far.
Facing each other rather desperately-
his eye is like a star-
we stare and say, "Well, we have come this far."

Elizabeth Bishop

Conversation

The tumult in the heart
keeps asking questions.
And then it stops and undertakes to answer
in the same tone of voice.
No one could tell the difference.

Uninnocent, these conversations start,
and then engage the senses,
only half-meaning to.
And then there is no choice,
and then there is no sense;

until a name
and all its connotation are the same.

Elizabeth Bishop

Exchanging Hats

Unfunny uncles who insist
in trying on a lady's hat,
--oh, even if the joke falls flat,
we share your slight transvestite twist

in spite of our embarrassment.
Costume and custom are complex.
The headgear of the other sex
inspires us to experiment.

Anandrous aunts, who, at the beach
with paper plates upon your laps,
keep putting on the yachtsmen's caps
with exhibitionistic screech,

the visors hanging o'er the ear
so that the golden anchors drag,
--the tides of fashion never lag.
Such caps may not be worn next year.

Or you who don the paper plate
itself, and put some grapes upon it,
or sport the Indian's feather bonnet,
--perversities may aggravate

the natural madness of the hatter.
And if the opera hats collapse
and crowns grow draughty, then, perhaps,
he thinks what might a miter matter?

Unfunny uncle, you who wore a
hat too big, or one too many,
tell us, can't you, are there any
stars inside your black fedora?

Aunt exemplary and slim,
with avernal eyes, we wonder
what slow changes they see under
their vast, shady, turned-down brim.

Elizabeth Bishop

Filling Station

Oh, but it is dirty!
--this little filling station,
oil-soaked, oil-permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
black translucency.
Be careful with that match!

Father wears a dirty,
oil-soaked monkey suit
that cuts him under the arms,
and several quick and saucy
and greasy sons assist him
(it's a family filling station),
all quite thoroughly dirty.

Do they live in the station?
It has a cement porch
behind the pumps, and on it
a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;
on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
the only note of color--
of certain color. They lie
upon a big dim doily
draping a taboret
(part of the set), beside
a big hirsute begonia.

Why the extraneous plant?
Why the taboret?
Why, oh why, the doily?
(Embroidered in daisy stitch
with marguerites, I think,
and heavy with gray crochet.)

Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe. Somebody
arranges the rows of cans
so that they softly say:
ESSO--SO--SO--SO

to high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all.

Elizabeth Bishop

First Death In Nova Scotia

In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur
beneath the chromographs:
Edward, Prince of Wales,
with Princess Alexandra,
and King George with Queen Mary.
Below them on the table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur's father.

Since Uncle Arthur fired
a bullet into him,
he hadn't said a word.
He kept his own counsel
on his white, frozen lake,
the marble-topped table.
His breast was deep and white,
cold and caressable;
his eyes were red glass,
much to be desired.

"Come," said my mother,
"Come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur."
I was lifted up and given
one lily of the valley
to put in Arthur's hand.
Arthur's coffin was
a little frosted cake,
and the red-eyed loon eyed it
from his white, frozen lake.

Arthur was very small.
He was all white, like a doll
that hadn't been painted yet.
Jack Frost had started to paint him
the way he always painted
the Maple Leaf (Forever).
He had just begun on his hair,
a few red strokes, and then
Jack Frost had dropped the brush
and left him white, forever.

The gracious royal couples
were warm in red and ermine;
their feet were well wrapped up
in the ladies' ermine trains.
They invited Arthur to be
the smallest page at court.
But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,

with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?

Elizabeth Bishop

Five Flights Up

Still dark.
The unknown bird sits on his usual branch.
The little dog next door barks in his sleep
inquiringly, just once.
Perhaps in his sleep, too, the bird inquires
once or twice, quavering.
Questions---if that is what they are---
answered directly, simply,
by day itself.

Enormous morning, ponderous, meticulous;
gray light streaking each bare branch,
each single twig, along one side,
making another tree, of glassy veins...
The bird still sits there. Now he seems to yawn.

The little black dog runs in his yard.
His owner's voice arises, stern,
"You ought to be ashamed!"
What has he done?
He bounces cheerfully up and down;
he rushes in circles in the fallen leaves.

Obviously, he has no sense of shame.
He and the bird know everything is answered,
all taken care of,
no need to ask again.
---Yesterday brought to today so lightly!
(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift.)

Elizabeth Bishop

Florida

The state with the prettiest name,
the state that floats in brackish water,
held together by mangrave 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 obbligatos.
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.

Elizabeth Bishop

Giant Snail

The rain has stopped. The waterfall will roar like that all night. I have come out to take a walk and feed. My body--foot, that is--is wet and cold and covered with sharp gravel. It is white, the size of a dinner plate. I have set myself a goal, a certain rock, but it may well be dawn before I get there. Although I move ghostlike and my floating edges barely graze the ground, I am heavy, heavy, heavy. My white muscles are already tired. I give the impression of mysterious ease, but it is only with the greatest effort of my will that I can rise above the smallest stones and sticks. And I must not let myself be distracted by those rough spears of grass. Don't touch them. Draw back. Withdrawal is always best.

The rain has stopped. The waterfall makes such a noise! (And what if I fall over it?) The mountains of black rock give off such clouds of steam! Shiny streamers are hanging down their sides. When this occurs, we have a saying that the Snail Gods have come down in haste. I could never descend such steep escarpments, much less dream of climbing them.

That toad was too big, too, like me. His eyes beseeched my love. Our proportions horrify our neighbors.

Rest a minute; relax. Flattened to the ground, my body is like a pallid, decomposing leaf. What's that tapping on my shell? Nothing. Let's go on.

My sides move in rhythmic waves, just off the ground, from front to back, the wake of a ship, wax-white water, or a slowly melting floe. I am cold, cold, cold as ice. My blind, white bull's head was a Cretan scare-head; degenerate, my four horns that can't attack. The sides of my mouth are now my hands. They press the earth and suck it hard. Ah, but I know my shell is beautiful, and high, and glazed, and shining. I know it well, although I have not seen it. Its curled white lip is of the finest enamel. Inside, it is as smooth as silk, and I, I fill it to perfection.

My wide wake shines, now it is growing dark. I leave a lovely opalescent ribbon: I know this.

But O! I am too big. I feel it. Pity me.

If and when I reach the rock, I shall go into a certain crack there for the night. The waterfall below will vibrate through my shell and body all night long. In that steady pulsing I can rest. All night I shall be like a sleeping ear.

Elizabeth Bishop

Giant Toad

I am too big. Too big by far. Pity me.

My eyes bulge and hurt. They are my one great beauty, even so. They see too much, above, below. And yet, there is not much to see. The rain has stopped. The mist is gathering on my skin in drops. The drops run down my back, run from the corners of my downturned mouth, run down my sides and drip beneath my belly. Perhaps the droplets on my mottled hide are pretty, like dewdrops, silver on a moldering leaf? They chill me through and through. I feel my colors changing now, my pigments gradually shudder and shift over.

Now I shall get beneath that overhanging ledge. Slowly. Hop. Two or three times more, silently. That was too far. I'm standing up. The lichen's gray, and rough to my front feet. Get down. Turn facing out, it's safer. Don't breathe until the snail gets by. But we go travelling the same weathers.

Swallow the air and mouthfuls of cold mist. Give voice, just once. O how it echoed from the rock! What a profound, angelic bell I rang!

I live, I breathe, by swallowing. Once, some naughty children picked me up, me and two brothers. They set us down again somewhere and in our mouths they put lit cigarettes. We could not help but smoke them, to the end. I thought it was the death of me, but when I was entirely filled with smoke, when my slack mouth was burning, and all my tripes were hot and dry, they let us go. But I was sick for days.

I have big shoulders, like a boxer. They are not muscle, however, and their color is dark. They are my sacs of poison, the almost unused poison that I bear, my burden and my great responsibility. Big wings of poison, folded on my back. Beware, I am an angel in disguise; my wings are evil, but not deadly. If I will it, the poison could break through, blue-black, and dangerous to all. Blue-black fumes would rise upon the air. Beware, you frivolous crab.

Elizabeth Bishop

I Am in Need of Music

I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling fingertips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.
Oh, for the healing swaying, old and low,
Of some song sung to rest the tired dead,
A song to fall like water on my head,
And over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow!

There is a magic made by melody:
A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

Elizabeth Bishop

In the Waiting Room

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.
My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited and read
the National Geographic
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
"Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.
And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I--we--were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,

February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world.
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How I didn't know any
word for it how "unlikely". . .
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

Elizabeth Bishop

Insomnia

The moon in the bureau mirror
looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, at herself,
but she never, never smiles)
far and away beyond sleep, or
perhaps she's a daytime sleeper.

By the Universe deserted,
she'd tell it to go to hell,
and she'd find a body of water,
or a mirror, on which to dwell.
So wrap up care in a cobweb
and drop it down the well

into that world inverted
where left is always right,
where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me.

Elizabeth Bishop

Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore

From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,
    please come flying.
In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals,
    please come flying,
to the rapid rolling of thousands of small blue drums
descending out of the mackerel sky
over the glittering grandstand of harbor-water,
    please come flying.

Whistles, pennants and smoke are blowing. The ships
are signaling cordially with multitudes of flags
rising and falling like birds all over the harbor.
Enter: two rivers, gracefully bearing
countless little pellucid jellies
in cut-glass epergnes dragging with silver chains.
The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged.
The waves are running in verses this fine morning.
    Please come flying.

Come with the pointed toe of each black shoe
trailing a sapphire highlight,
with a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots,
with heaven knows how many angels all riding
on the broad black brim of your hat,
    please come flying.

Bearing a musical inaudible abacus,
a slight censorious frown, and blue ribbons,
    please come flying.
Facts and skyscrapers glint in the tide; Manhattan
is all awash with morals this fine morning,
    so please come flying.

Mounting the sky with natural heroism,
above the accidents, above the malignant movies,
the taxicabs and injustices at large,
while horns are resounding in your beautiful ears
that simultaneously listen to
a soft uninvented music, fit for the musk deer,
    please come flying.

For whom the grim museums will behave
like courteous male bower-birds,
for whom the agreeable lions lie in wait
on the steps of the Public Library,
eager to rise and follow through the doors
up into the reading rooms,
    please come flying.
We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping,
or play at a game of constantly being wrong
with a priceless set of vocabularies,
or we can bravely deplore, but please

please come flying.

With dynasties of negative constructions
darkening and dying around you,
with grammar that suddenly turns and shines
like flocks of sandpipers flying,
please come flying.

Come like a light in the white mackerel sky,
come like a daytime comet
with a long unnebulous train of words,
from Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,
please come flying.

Elizabeth Bishop

Large Bad Picture

Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or
some northerly harbor of Labrador,
before he became a schoolteacher
a great-uncle painted a big picture.

Receding for miles on either side
into a flushed, still sky
are overhanging pale blue cliffs
hundreds of feet high,

their bases fretted by little arches,
the entrances to caves
running in along the level of a bay
masked by perfect waves.

On the middle of that quiet floor
sits a fleet of small black ships,
square-rigged, sails furled, motionless,
their spars like burnt match-sticks.

And high above them, over the tall cliffs'
semi-translucent ranks,
are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds
hanging in n's in banks.

One can hear their crying, crying,
the only sound there is
except for occasional sizhine
as a large aquatic animal breathes.

In the pink light
the small red sun goes rolling, rolling,
round and round and round at the same height
in perpetual sunset, comprehensive, consoling,

while the ships consider it.
Apparently they have reached their destination.
It would be hard to say what brought them there,
commerce or contemplation.

Elizabeth Bishop

Letter To N.Y.

For Louise Crane

In your next letter I wish you'd say
where you are going and what you are doing;
how are the plays and after the plays
what other pleasures you're pursuing:

taking cabs in the middle of the night,
driving as if to save your soul
where the road gose round and round the park
and the meter glares like a moral owl,

and the trees look so queer and green
standing alone in big black caves
and suddenly you're in a different place
where everything seems to happen in waves,

and most of the jokes you just can't catch,
like dirty words rubbed off a slate,
and the songs are loud but somehow dim
and it gets so teribly late,

and coming out of the brownstone house
to the gray sidewalk, the watered street,
one side of the buildings rises with the sun
like a glistening field of wheat.

--Wheat, not oats, dear. I'm afraid
if it's wheat it's none of your sowing,
nevertheless I'd like to know
what you are doing and where you are going.

Elizabeth Bishop

Lines Written In The Fannie Farmer Cookbook

[Given to Frank Bidart]

You won't become a gourmet* cook
By studying our Fannie's book--
Her thoughts on Food & Keeping House
Are scarcely those of Lévi-Strauss.
Nevertheless, you'll find, Frank dear,
The basic elements** are here.
And if a problem should arise:
The Soufflé fall before your eyes,
Or strange things happen to the Rice
--You know I love to give advice.

Elizabeth
Christmas, 1971

* Forbidden word
** Forbidden phrase

P.S. Fannie should not be underrated;
She has become sophisticated.
She's picked up many gourmet* tricks
Since the edition of '96.

Elizabeth Bishop

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.

Elizabeth Bishop

Love Lies Sleeping

Earliest morning, switching all the tracks
that cross the sky from cinder star to star,
        coupling the ends of streets
        to trains of light.

now draw us into daylight in our beds;
and clear away what presses on the brain:
        put out the neon shapes
        that float and swell and glare

down the gray avenue between the eyes
in pinks and yellows, letters and twitching signs.
        Hang-over moons, wane, wane!
        From the window I see

an immense city, carefully revealed,
made delicate by over-workmanship,
        detail upon detail,
        cornice upon facade,

reaching up so languidly up into
a weak white sky, it seems to waver there.
        (Where it has slowly grown
        in skies of water-glass

from fused beads of iron and copper crystals,
the little chemical "garden" in a jar
        trembles and stands again,
        pale blue, blue-green, and brick.)

The sparrows hurriedly begin their play.
Then, in the West, "Boom!" and a cloud of smoke.
        "Boom!" and the exploding ball
        of blossom blooms again.

(And all the employees who work in a plants
where such a sound says "Danger," or once said "Death,"
        turn in their sleep and feel
        the short hairs bristling

on backs of necks.) The cloud of smoke moves off.
A shirt is taken of a threadlike clothes-line.
        Along the street below
        the water-wagon comes

throwing its hissing, snowy fan across
peelings and newspapers. The water dries
        light-dry, dark-wet, the pattern
        of the cool watermelon.

I hear the day-springs of the morning strike
from stony walls and halls and iron beds,

scattered or grouped cascades,
alarms for the expected:

queer cupids of all persons getting up,
whose evening meal they will prepare all day,
you will dine well
on his heart, on his, and his,

so send them about your business affectionately,
dragging in the streets their unique loves.
Scourge them with roses only,
be light as helium,

for always to one, or several, morning comes
whose head has fallen over the edge of his bed,
whose face is turned
so that the image of

the city grows down into his open eyes
inverted and distorted. No. I mean
distorted and revealed,
if he sees it at all.

Elizabeth Bishop

Lullaby For the Cat

Minnow, go to sleep and dream,
Close your great big eyes;
Round your bed Events prepare
The pleasantest surprise.

Darling Minnow, drop that frown,
Just cooperate,
Not a kitten shall be drowned
In the Marxist State.

Joy and Love will both be yours,
Minnow, don't be glum.
Happy days are coming soon --
Sleep, and let them come...

Elizabeth Bishop

Manners

For a Child of 1918

My grandfather said to me
as we sat on the wagon seat,
"Be sure to remember to always
speak to everyone you meet."

We met a stranger on foot.
My grandfather's whip tapped his hat.
"Good day, sir. Good day. A fine day."
And I said it and bowed where I sat.

Then we overtook a boy we knew
with his big pet crow on his shoulder.
"Always offer everyone a ride;
don't forget that when you get older,"

my grandfather said. So Willy
climbed up with us, but the crow
gave a "Caw!" and flew off. I was worried.
How would he know where to go?

But he flew a little way at a time
from fence post to fence post, ahead;
and when Willy whistled he answered.
"A fine bird," my grandfather said,

"and he's well brought up. See, he answers
nicely when he's spoken to.
Man or beast, that's good manners.
Be sure that you both always do."

When automobiles went by,
the dust hid the people's faces,
but we shouted "Good day! Good day!
Fine day!" at the top of our voices.

When we came to Hustler Hill,
he said that the mare was tired,
so we all got down and walked,
as our good manners required.

Elizabeth Bishop

Manuelzinho

[Brazil. A friend of the writer is speaking.]

Half squatter, half tenant (no rent)—
a sort of inheritance; white,
in your thirties now, and supposed
to supply me with vegetables,
but you don't; or you won't; or you can't
get the idea through your brain—
the world's worst gardener since Cain.
Titled above me, your gardens
ravish my eyes. You edge
the beds of silver cabbages
with red carnations, and lettuces
mix with alyssum. And then
umbrella ants arrive,
or it rains for a solid week
and the whole thing's ruined again
and I buy you more pounds of seeds,
imported, guaranteed,
and eventually you bring me
a mystic thee-legged carrot,
or a pumpkin "bigger than the baby."

I watch you through the rain,
trotting, light, on bare feet,
up the steep paths you have made—
or your father and grandfather made—
all over my property,
with your head and back inside
a sodden burlap bag,
and feel I can't endure it
another minute; then,
indoors, beside the stove,
keep on reading a book.

You steal my telephone wires,
or someone does. You starve
your horse and yourself
and your dogs and family.
among endless variety,
you eat boiled cabbage stalks.
And once I yelled at you
so loud to hurry up
and fetch me those potatoes
your holey hat flew off,
you jumped out of your clogs,
leaving three objects arranged
in a triangle at my feet,
as if you'd been a gardener
in a fairy tale all this time
and at the word "potatoes"

had vanished to take up your work
of fairy prince somewhere.

The strangest things happen to you.
Your cows eats a "poison grass"
and drops dead on the spot.
Nobody else's does.
And then your father dies,
a superior old man
with a black plush hat, and a moustache
like a white spread-eagled sea gull.
The family gathers, but you,
no, you "don't think he's dead!
I look at him. He's cold.
They're burying him today.
But you know, I don't think he's dead."
I give you money for the funeral
and you go and hire a bus
for the delighted mourners,
so I have to hand over some more
and then have to hear you tell me
you pray for me every night!

And then you come again,
sniffing and shivering,
hat in hand, with that wistful
face, like a child's fistful
of bluets or white violets,
improvident as the dawn,
and once more I provide
for a shot of penicillin
down at the pharmacy, or
one more bottle of
Electrical Baby Syrup.
Or, briskly, you come to settle
what we call our "accounts,"
with two old copybooks,
one with flowers on the cover,
the other with a camel.
immediate confusion.
You've left out decimal points.
Your columns stagger,
honeycombed with zeros.
You whisper conspiratorially;
the numbers mount to millions.
Account books? They are Dream Books.
in the kitchen we dream together
how the meek shall inherit the earth—
or several acres of mine.

With blue sugar bags on their heads,
carrying your lunch,

your children scuttle by me
like little moles aboveground,
or even crouch behind bushes
as if I were out to shoot them!
—Impossible to make friends,
though each will grab at once
for an orange or a piece of candy.

Twined in wisps of fog,
I see you all up there
along with Formoso, the donkey,
who brays like a pump gone dry,
then suddenly stops.
—All just standing, staring
off into fog and space.
Or coming down at night,
in silence, except for hoofs,
in dim moonlight, the horse
or Formoso stumbling after.
Between us float a few
big, soft, pale-blue,
sluggish fireflies,
the jellyfish of the air...

Patch upon patch upon patch,
your wife keeps all of you covered.
She has gone over and over
(forearmed is forewarned)
your pair of bright-blue pants
with white thread, and these days
your limbs are draped in blueprints.
You paint—heaven knows why—
the outside of the crown
and brim of your straw hat.
Perhaps to reflect the sun?
Or perhaps when you were small,
your mother said, "Manuelzinho,
one thing; be sure you always
paint your straw hat."
One was gold for a while,
but the gold wore off, like plate.
One was bright green. Unkindly,
I called you Klorophyll Kid.
My visitors thought it was funny.
I apologize here and now.
You helpless, foolish man,
I love you all I can,
I think. Or I do?
I take off my hat, unpainted
and figurative, to you.
Again I promise to try.

Elizabeth Bishop

North Haven

In Memoriam: Robert Lowell

I can make out the rigging of a schooner
a mile off; I can count
the new cones on the spruce. It is so still
the pale bay wears a milky skin; the sky
no clouds except for one long, carded horse¹s tail.

The islands haven't shifted since last summer,
even if I like to pretend they have--
drifting, in a dreamy sort of way,
a little north, a little south, or sidewise--
and that they¹re free within the blue frontiers of bay.

This month our favorite one is full of flowers:
buttercups, red clover, purple vetch,
hackweed still burning, daisies pied, eyebright,
the fragrant bedstraw's incandescent stars,
and more, returned, to paint the meadows with delight.

The goldfinches are back, or others like them,
and the white-throated sparrow's five-note song,
pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.
Nature repeats herself, or almost does:
repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.

Years ago, you told me it was here
(in 1932?) you first "discovered girls"
and learned to sail, and learned to kiss.
You had "such fun," you said, that classic summer.
("Fun"--it always seemed to leave you at a loss...)

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
afloat in mystic blue...And now--you've left
for good. You can't derange, or rearrange,
your poems again. (But the sparrows can their song.)
The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.

Elizabeth Bishop

O breath

Beneath that loved and celebrated breast,
silent, bored really blindly veined,
grieves, maybe lives and lets
live, passes bets,
something moving but invisibly,
and with what clamor why restrained
I cannot fathom even a ripple.
(See the thin flying of nine black hairs
four around one five the other nipple,
flying almost intolerably on your own breath.)
Equivocal, but what we have in common's bound to be there,
whatever we must own equivalents for,
something that maybe I could bargain with
and make a separate peace beneath
within if never with.

Elizabeth Bishop

One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster,

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three beloved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

- Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like a disaster.

Elizabeth Bishop

Poem

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,
American or Canadian,
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays
-this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)
has never earned any money in its life.
Useless and free., it has spent seventy years
as a minor family relic handed along collaterally to owners
who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to.

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see abled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees., low hills, a thin church steeple
-that gray-blue wisp-or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back,, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.
The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist's specialty.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind-I can almost remember the farmer's name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.
Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?
Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time.

A sketch done in an hour, "in one breath,"
once taken from a trunk and handed over.
Would you like this? I'll Probably never
have room to hang these things again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A....

I never knew him. We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).

Our visions coincided-"visions" is
too serious a word-our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life" and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail
-the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Elizabeth Bishop

Questions of Travel

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.
--For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
aren't waterfalls yet,
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be.
But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,
the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
slime-hung and barnacled.

Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play
in this strangest of theatres?
What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life
in our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around?
The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?
To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,
inexplicable and impenetrable,
at any view,
instantly seen and always, always delightful?
Oh, must we dream our dreams
and have them, too?
And have we room
for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the trees along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty,
not to have seen them gesturing
like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
--Not to have had to stop for gas and heard
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
of disparate wooden clogs
carelessly clacking over
a grease-stained filling-station floor.
(In another country the clogs would all be tested.
Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
--A pity not to have heard
the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
who sings above the broken gasoline pump
in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
three towers, five silver crosses.
--Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
blurr'dly and inconclusively,
on what connection can exist for centuries
between the crudest wooden footwear

and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.
--Never to have studied history in
the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.
--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
in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?"

Elizabeth Bishop

Rain Towards Morning

The great light cage has broken up in the air,
freeing, I think, about a million birds
whose wild ascending shadows will not be back,
and all the wires come falling down.
No cage, no frightening birds; the rain
is brightening now. The face is pale
that tried the puzzle of their prison
and solved it with an unexpected kiss,
whose freckled unsuspected hands alit.

Elizabeth Bishop

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 rusting 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 irons 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 two 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 event 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.

Elizabeth Bishop

Sandpiper

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
of interrupting water comes and goes
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

- Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,

looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!
The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

Elizabeth Bishop

Seascape

This celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels,
flying 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 wildflower
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.

Elizabeth Bishop

Sestina

September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.
The iron kettle sings on the stove.
She cuts some bread and says to the child,

It's time for tea now; but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove.

It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
I know what I know, says the almanac.
With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house.

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

Elizabeth Bishop

Sleeping on the Ceiling

It is so peaceful on the ceiling!
It is the Place de la Concorde.
The little crystal chandelier
is off, the fountain is in the dark.
Not a soul is in the park.

Below, where the wallpaper is peeling,
the Jardin des Plantes has locked its gates.
Those photographs are animals.
The mighty flowers and foliage rustle;
under the leaves the insects tunnel.

We must go under the wallpaper
to meet the insect-gladiator,
to battle with a net and trident,
and leave the fountain and the square
But oh, that we could sleep up there...

Elizabeth Bishop

Song for the Rainy Season

Hidden, oh hidden
in the high fog
the house we live in,
beneath the magnetic rock,
rain-, rainbow-ridden,
where blood-black
bromelias, lichens,
owls, and the lint
of the waterfalls cling,
familiar, unbidden.

In a dim age
of water
the brook sings loud
from a rib cage
of giant fern; vapor
climbs up the thick growth
effortlessly, turns back,
holding them both,
house and rock,
in a private cloud.

At night, on the roof,
blind drops crawl
and the ordinary brown
owl gives us proof
he can count:
five times--always five--
he stamps and takes off
after the fat frogs that,
shrilling for love,
clamber and mount.

House, open house
to the white dew
and the milk-white sunrise
kind to the eyes,
to membership
of silver fish, mouse,
bookworms,
big moths; with a wall
for the mildew's
ignorant map;

darkened and tarnished
by the warm touch
of the warm breath,
maculate, cherished;
rejoice! For a later
era will differ.
(O difference that kills
or intimidates, much

of all our small shadowy
life!) Without water

the great rock will stare
unmagnetized, bare,
no longer wearing
rainbows or rain,
the forgiving air
and the high fog gone;
the owls will move on
and the several
waterfalls shrivel
in the steady sun.

Elizabeth Bishop

Songs for a Colored Singer

I

A washing hangs upon the line,
but it's not mine.
None of the things that I can see
belong to me.
The neighbors got a radio with an aerial;
we got a little portable.
They got a lot of closet space;
we got a suitcase.

I say, "Le Roy, just how much are we owing?
Something I can't comprehend,
the more we got the more we spend...."
He only answers, "Let's get going."
Le Roy, you're earning too much money now.

I sit and look at our backyard
and find it very hard.
What have we got for all his dollars and cents?
--A pile of bottles by the fence.
He's faithful and he's kind
but he sure has an inquiring mind.
He's seen a lot; he's bound to see the rest,
and if I protest

Le Roy answers with a frown,
"Darling, when I earns I spends.
The world is wide; it still extends....
I'm going to get a job in the next town."
Le Roy, you're earning too much money now.

II

The time has come to call a halt;
and so it ends.
He's gone off with his other friends.
He needn't try to make amends,
this occasion's all his fault.
Through rain and dark I see his face
across the street at Flossie's place.
He's drinking in the warm pink glow
to th' accompaniment of the piccolo.

The time has come to call a halt.
I met him walking with Varella
and hit him twice with my umbrella.
Perhaps that occasion was my fault,
but the time has come to call a halt.

Go drink your wine and go get tight.
Let the piccolo play.

I'm sick of all your fussing anyway.
Now I'm pursuing my own way.
I'm leaving on the bus tonight.
Far down the highway wet and black
I'll ride and ride and not come back.
I'm going to go and take the bus
and find someone monogamous.

The time has come to call a halt.
I've borrowed fifteen dollars fare
and it will take me anywhere.
For this occasion's all his fault.
The time has come to call a halt.

III

Lullaby.
Adult and child
sink to their rest.
At sea the big ship sinks and dies,
lead in its breast.

Lullaby.
Let mations rage,
let nations fall.
The shadow of the crib makes an enormous cage
upon the wall.

Lullaby.
Sleep on and on,
war's over soon.
Drop the silly, harmless toy,
pick up the moon.

Lullaby.
If they should say
you have no sense,
don't you mind them; it won't make
much difference.

Lullaby.
Adult and child
sink to their rest.
At sea the big ship sinks and dies,
lead in its breast.

IV

What's that shining in the leaves,
the shadowy leaves,
like tears when somebody grieves,
shining, shining in the leaves?

Is it dew or is it tears,
dew or tears,
hanging there for years and years
like a heavy dew of tears?

Then that dew begins to fall,
roll down and fall,
Maybe it's not tears at all.
See it, see it roll and fall.

Hear it falling on the ground,
hear, all around.
That is not a tearful sound,
beating, beating on the ground.

See it lying there like seeds,
like black seeds.
see it taking root like weeds,
faster, faster than the weeds,

all the shining seeds take root,
conspiring root,
and what curious flower or fruit
will grow from that conspiring root?

fruit or flower? It is a face.
Yes, a face.
In that dark and dreary place
each seed grows into a face.

Like an army in a dream
the faces seem,
darker, darker, like a dream.
They're too real to be a dream.

Elizabeth Bishop

Sonnet

I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling finger-tips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.
Oh, for the healing swaying, old and low,
Of some song sung to rest the tired dead,
A song to fall like water on my head,
And over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow!

There is a magic made by melody:
A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

Elizabeth Bishop

Sonnet (1928)

I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling finger-tips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.
Oh, for the healing swaying, old and low,
Of some song sung to rest the tired dead,
A song to fall like water on my head,
And over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow!

There is a magic made by melody:
A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

Elizabeth Bishop

Sonnet (1979)

Caught -- the bubble
in the spirit level,
a creature divided;
and the compass needle
wobbling and wavering,
undecided.
Freed -- the broken
thermometer's mercury
running away;
and the rainbow-bird
from the narrow bevel
of the empty mirror,
flying wherever
it feels like, gay!

Elizabeth Bishop

Squatter's Children

On the unbreathing sides of hills
they play, a specklike girl and boy,
alone, but near a specklike house.
The Sun's suspended eye
blinks casually, and then they wade
gigantic waves of light and shade.
A dancing yellow spot, a pup,
attends them. Clouds are piling up;

a storm piles up behind the house.
The children play at digging holes.
The ground is hard; they try to use
one of their father's tools,
a mattock with a broken haft
the two of them can scarcely lift.
It drops and clangs. Their laughter spreads
effulgence in the thunderheads,

Weak flashes of inquiry
direct as is the puppy's bark.
But to their little, soluble,
unwarrantable ark,
apparently the rain's reply
consists of echolalia,
and Mother's voice, ugly as sin,
keeps calling to them to come in.

Children, the threshold of the storm
has slid beneath your muddy shoes;
wet and beguiled, you stand among
the mansions you may choose
out of a bigger house than yours,
whose lawfulness endures.
It's soggy documents retain
your rights in rooms of falling rain.

Elizabeth Bishop

Strayed Crab

This is not my home. How did I get so far from water? It must
be over that way somewhere.
I am the color of wine, of tinta. The inside of my powerful
right claw is saffron-yellow. See, I see it now; I wave it like a
flag. I am dapper and elegant; I move with great precision,
cleverly managing all my smaller yellow claws. I believe in the
oblique, the indirect approach, and I keep my feelings to myself.
But on this strange, smooth surface I am making too much
noise. I wasn't meant for this. If I maneuver a bit and keep a
sharp lookout, I shall find my pool again. Watch out for my right
claw, all passersby! This place is too hard. The rain has stopped,
and it is damp, but still not wet enough to please me.
My eyes are good, though small; my shell is tough and tight.
In my own pool are many small gray fish. I see right through
them. Only their large eyes are opaque, and twitch at me. They
are hard to catch but I, I catch them quickly in my arms and
eat them up.
What is that big soft monster, like a yellow cloud, stifling
and warm? What is it doing? It pats my back. Out, claw. There,
I have frightened it away. It's sitting down, pretending nothing's
happened. I'll skirt it. It's still pretending not to see me. Out of
my way, O monster. I own a pool, all the little fish that swim in it,
and all the skittering waterbugs that smell like rotten apples.
Cheer up, O grievous snail. I tap your shell, encouragingly,
not that you will ever know about it.
And I want nothing to do with you, either, sulking toad.
Imagine, at least four times my size and yet so vulnerable... I
could open your belly with my claw. You glare and bulge, a
watchdog near my pool; you make a loud and hollow noise. I
do not care for such stupidity. I admire compression, lightness,
and agility, all rare in this loose world.

Elizabeth Bishop

Suicide of a Moderate Dictator

This is a day when truths will out, perhaps;
leak from the dangling telephone earphones
sapping the festooned switchboards' strength;
fall from the windows, blow from off the sills,
—the vague, slight unremarkable contents
of emptying ash-trays; rub off on our fingers
like ink from the un-proof-read newspapers,
crocking the way the unfocused photographs
of crooked faces do that soil our coats,
our tropical-weight coats, like slapped-at moths.

Today's a day when those who work
are idling. Those who played must work
and hurry, too, to get it done,
with little dignity or none.
The newspapers are sold; the kiosk shutters
crash down. But anyway, in the night
the headlines wrote themselves, see, on the streets
and sidewalks everywhere; a sediment's splashed
even to the first floors of apartment houses.

This is a day that's beautiful as well,
and warm and clear. At seven o'clock I saw
the dogs being walked along the famous beach
as usual, in a shiny gray-green dawn,
leaving their paw prints draining in the wet.
The line of breakers was steady and the pinkish,
segmented rainbow steadily hung above it.
At eight two little boys were flying kites.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Armadillo

For Robert Lowell

This is the time of year
when almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height,

rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts,
the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts.

Once up against the sky it's hard
to tell them from the stars--
planets, that is--the tinted ones:
Venus going down, or Mars,

or the pale green one. With a wind,
they flare and falter, wobble and toss;
but if it's still they steer between
the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,

receding, dwindling, solemnly
and steadily forsaking us,
or, in the downdraft from a peak,
suddenly turning dangerous.

Last night another big one fell.
It splattered like an egg of fire
against the cliff behind the house.
The flame ran down. We saw the pair

of owls who nest there flying up
and up, their whirling black-and-white
stained bright pink underneath, until
they shrieked up out of sight.

The ancient owls' nest must have burned.
Hastily, all alone,
a glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, tail down,

and then a baby rabbit jumped out,
short-eared, to our surprise.
So soft!--a handful of intangible ash
with fixed, ignited eyes.

Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry! O falling fire and piercing cry and panic,
and a weak mailed fist clenched ignorant against the sky!

Elizabeth Bishop

The Bight

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.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Burglar Of Babylon

On the fair green hills of Rio
    There grows a fearful stain:
The poor who come to Rio
    And can't go home again.

On the hills a million people,
    A million sparrows, nest,
Like a confused migration
    That's had to light and rest,

Building its nests, or houses,
    Out of nothing at all, or air.
You'd think a breath would end them,
    They perch so lightly there.

But they cling and spread like lichen,
    And people come and come.
There's one hill called the Chicken,
    And one called Catacomb;

There's the hill of Kerosene,
    And the hill of Skeleton,
The hill of Astonishment,
    And the hill of Babylon.

Micuçú was a burglar and killer,
    An enemy of society.
He had escaped three times
    From the worst penitentiary.

They don't know how many he murdered
    (Though they say he never raped),
And he wounded two policemen
    This last time he escaped.

They said, "He'll go to his auntie,
    Who raised him like a son.
She has a little drink shop
    On the hill of Babylon."

He did go straight to his auntie,
    And he drank a final beer.
He told her, "The soldiers are coming,
    And I've got to disappear."

"Ninety years they gave me.
    Who wants to live that long?
I'll settle for ninety hours,
    On the hill of Babylon.

"Don't tell anyone you saw me.
    I'll run as long as I can.

You were good to me, and I love you,
    But I'm a doomed man."

Going out, he met a mulata
    Carrying water on her head.
"If you say you saw me, daughter,
    You're as good as dead."

There are caves up there, and hideouts,
    And an old fort, falling down.
They used to watch for Frenchmen
    From the hill of Babylon.

Below him was the ocean.
    It reached far up the sky,
Flat as a wall, and on it
    Were freighters passing by,

Or climbing the wall, and climbing
    Till each looked like a fly,
And then fell over and vanished;
    And he knew he was going to die.

He could hear the goats baa-baa-ing.
    He could hear the babies cry;
Fluttering kites strained upward;
    And he knew he was going to die.

A buzzard flapped so near him
    He could see its naked neck.
He waved his arms and shouted,
    "Not yet, my son, not yet!"

An Army helicopter
    Came nosing around and in.
He could see two men inside it,
    but they never spotted him.

The soldiers were all over,
    On all sides of the hill,
And right against the skyline
    A row of them, small and still.

Children peeked out of windows,
    And men in the drink shop swore,
And spat a little cachaça
    At the light cracks in the floor.

But the soldiers were nervous, even
    with tommy guns in hand,
And one of them, in a panic,
    Shot the officer in command.

He hit him in three places;
    The other shots went wild.
The soldier had hysterics
    And sobbed like a little child.

The dying man said, "Finish
    The job we came here for."
he committed his soul to God
    And his sons to the Governor.

They ran and got a priest,
    And he died in hope of Heaven
--A man from Pernambuco,
    The youngest of eleven.

They wanted to stop the search,
    but the Army said, "No, go on,"
So the soldiers swarmed again
    Up the hill of Babylon.

Rich people in apartments
    Watched through binoculars
As long as the daylight lasted.
    And all night, under the stars,

Micuçú hid in the grasses
    Or sat in a little tree,
Listening for sounds, and staring
    At the lighthouse out at sea.

And the lighthouse stared back at him,
    til finally it was dawn.
He was soaked with dew, and hungry,
    On the hill of Babylon.

The yellow sun was ugly,
    Like a raw egg on a plate--
Slick from the sea. He cursed it,
    For he knew it sealed his fate.

He saw the long white beaches
    And people going to swim,
With towels and beach umbrellas,
    But the soldiers were after him.

Far, far below, the people
    Were little colored spots,
And the heads of those in swimming
    Were floating coconuts.

He heard the peanut vendor

Go peep-peep on his whistle,
And the man that sells umbrellas
Swinging his watchman's rattle.

Women with market baskets
Stood on the corners and talked,
Then went on their way to market,
Gazing up as they walked.

The rich with their binoculars
Were back again, and many
Were standing on the rooftops,
Among TV antennae.

It was early, eight or eight-thirty.
He saw a soldier climb,
Looking right at him. He fired,
And missed for the last time.

He could hear the soldier panting,
Though he never got very near.
Micuçú dashed for shelter.
But he got it, behind the ear.

He heard the babies crying
Far, far away in his head,
And the mongrels barking and barking.
Then Micuçú was dead.

He had a Taurus revolver,
And just the clothes he had on,
With two contos in the pockets,
On the hill of Babylon.

The police and the populace
Heaved a sigh of relief,
But behind the counter his auntie
Wiped her eyes in grief.

"We have always been respected.
My shop is honest and clean.
I loved him, but from a baby
Micuçú was mean.

"We have always been respected.
His sister has a job.
Both of us gave him money.
Why did he have to rob?

"I raised him to be honest,
Even here, in Babylon slum."
The customers had another,

Looking serious and glum.

But one of them said to another,
When he got outside the door,
"He wasn't much of a burglar,
He got caught six times--or more."

This morning the little soldiers
are on Babylon hill again;
Their gun barrels and helmets
Shine in a gentle rain.

Micuçú is buried already.
They're after another two,
But they say they aren't as dangerous
As the poor Micuçú.

On the green hills of Rio
There grows a fearful stain:
The poor who come to Rio
And can't go home again.

There's the hill of Kerosene,
And the hill of the Skeleton,
The hill of Astonishment,
And the hill of Babylon.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Colder The Air

We must admire her perfect aim,
this huntress of the winter air
whose level weapon needs no sight,
if it were not that everywhere
her game is sure, her shot is right.
The least of us could do the same.

The chalky birds or boats stand still,
reducing her conditions of chance;
air's gallery marks identically
the narrow gallery of her glance.
The target-center in her eye
is equally her aim and will.

Time's in her pocket, ticking loud
on one stalled second. She'll consult
not time nor circumstance. She calls
on atmosphere for her result.
(It is this clock that later falls
in wheels and chimes of leaf and cloud.)

Elizabeth Bishop

The End Of March

For John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read: Duxbury

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
to take a walk on that long beach
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation
of a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers
in upright, steely mist.

The sky was darker than the water
--it was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
a track of big dog-prints (so big
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
over and over. Finally, they did end:
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost...
A kite string?--But no kite.

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of--are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I'd like to retire there and do nothing,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
At night, a grog a l'américaine.
I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
and lovely diaphanous blue flame
would waver, doubled in the window.
There must be a stove; there is a chimney,
askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly
--at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes the whole affair
to something off behind the dunes.

A light to read by--perfect! But--impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold
even to get that far,
and of course the house was boarded up.

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.
The sun came out for just a minute.
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,
the drab, damp, scattered stones
were multi-colored,
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,
individual shadows, then pulled them in again.
They could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that now he was behind them
--a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

Elizabeth Bishop

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 and 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.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Imaginary Iceberg

We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship,
although it meant the end of travel.
Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock
and all the sea were moving marble.
We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship;
we'd rather own this breathing plain of snow
though the ship's sails were laid upon the sea
as the snow lies undissolved upon the water.
O solemn, floating field,
are you aware an iceberg takes repose
with you, and when it wakes may pasture on your snows?

This is a scene a sailor'd give his eyes for.
The ship's ignored. The iceberg rises
and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles
correct elliptics in the sky.
This is a scene where he who treads the boards
is artlessly rhetorical. The curtain
is light enough to rise on finest ropes
that airy twists of snow provide.
The wits of these white peaks
spar with the sun. Its weight the iceberg dares
upon a shifting stage and stands and stares.

The iceberg cuts its facets from within.
Like jewelry from a grave
it saves itself perpetually and adorns
only itself, perhaps the snows
which so surprise us lying on the sea.
Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off
where waves give in to one another's waves
and clouds run in a warmer sky.
Icebergs behoove the soul
(both being self-made from elements least visible)
to see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Man-moth

Here, above,
cracks in the buldings are filled with battered moonlight.
The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.
It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,
and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon.
He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,
feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,
of a temperature impossible to records in thermometers.

But when the Man-Moth
pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,
the moon looks rather different to him. He emerges
from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
proving the sky quite useless for protection.
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

Up the façades,
his shadow dragging like a photographer's cloth behind him
he climbs fearfully, thinking that this time he will manage
to push his small head through that round clean opening
and be forced through, as from a tube, in black scrolls on the light.
(Man, standing below him, has no such illusions.)
But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although
he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt.

Then he returns
to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. He flits,
he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent trains
fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.
The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the wrong way
and the train starts at once at its full, terrible speed,
without a shift in gears or a gradation of any sort.
He cannot tell the rate at which he travels backwards.

Each night he must
be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams.
Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie
his rushing brain. He does not dare look out the window,
for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,
runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease
he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep
his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers.

If you catch him,
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.
Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention
he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,

cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

Elizabeth Bishop

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.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Monument

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood
built somewhat like a box. No. Built
like several boxes in descending sizes
one above the other.
Each is turned half-way round so that
its corners point toward the sides
of the one below and the angles alternate.
Then on the topmost cube is set
a sort of fleur-de-lys of weathered wood,
long petals of board, pierced with odd holes,
four-sided, stiff, ecclesiastical.
From it four thin, warped poles spring out,
(slanted like fishing-poles or flag-poles)
and from them jig-saw work hangs down,
four lines of vaguely whittled ornament
over the edges of the boxes
to the ground.
The monument is one-third set against
a sea; two-thirds against a sky.
The view is geared
(that is, the view's perspective)
so low there is no "far away,"
and we are far away within the view.
A sea of narrow, horizontal boards
lies out behind our lonely monument,
its long grains alternating right and left
like floor-boards--spotted, swarming-still,
and motionless. A sky runs parallel,
and it is palings, coarser than the sea's:
splintery sunlight and long-fibred clouds.
"Why does the strange sea make no sound?
Is it because we're far away?
Where are we? Are we in Asia Minor,
or in Mongolia?"
An ancient promontory,
an ancient principality whose artist-prince
might have wanted to build a monument
to mark a tomb or boundary, or make
a melancholy or romantic scene of it...
"But that queer sea looks made of wood,
half-shining, like a driftwood, sea.
And the sky looks wooden, grained with cloud.
It's like a stage-set; it is all so flat!
Those clouds are full of glistening splinters!
What is that?"
It is the monument.
"It's piled-up boxes,
outlined with shoddy fret-work, half-fallen off,
cracked and unpainted. It looks old."
--The strong sunlight, the wind from the sea,
all the conditions of its existence,
may have flaked off the paint, if ever it was painted,

and made it homelier than it was.
"Why did you bring me here to see it?
A temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery,
what can it prove?
I am tired of breathing this eroded air,
this dryness in which the monument is cracking."

It is an artifact
of wood. Wood holds together better
than sea or cloud or and could by itself,
much better than real sea or sand or cloud.
It chose that way to grow and not to move.
The monument's an object, yet those decorations,
carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,
give it away as having life, and wishing;
wanting to be a monument, to cherish something.
The crudest scroll-work says "commemorate,"
while once each day the light goes around it
like a prowling animal,
or the rain falls on it, or the wind blows into it.
It may be solid, may be hollow.
The bones of the artist-prince may be inside
or far away on even drier soil.
But roughly but adequately it can shelter
what is within (which after all
cannot have been intended to be seen).
It is the beginning of a painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Moose

For Grace Bulmer Bowers

From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea,
home of the long tides
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herrings long rides,

where if the river
enters or retreats
in a wall of brown foam
depends on if it meets
the bay coming in,
the bay not at home;

where, silted red,
sometimes the sun sets
facing a red sea,
and others, veins the flats'
lavender, rich mud
in burning rivulets;

on red, gravelly roads,
down rows of sugar maples,
past clapboard farmhouses
and neat, clapboard churches,
bleached, ridged as clamshells,
past twin silver birches,

through late afternoon
a bus journeys west,
the windshield flashing pink,
pink glancing off of metal,
brushing the dented flank
of blue, beat-up enamel;

down hollows, up rises,
and waits, patient, while
a lone traveller gives
kisses and embraces
to seven relatives
and a collie supervises.

Goodbye to the elms,
to the farm, to the dog.
The bus starts. The light
grows richer; the fog,
shifting, salty, thin,
comes closing in.

Its cold, round crystals
form and slide and settle
in the white hens' feathers,
in gray glazed cabbages,
on the cabbage roses
and lupins like apostles;

the sweet peas cling
to their wet white string
on the whitewashed fences;
bumblebees creep
inside the foxgloves,
and evening commences.

One stop at Bass River.
Then the Economies
Lower, Middle, Upper;
Five Islands, Five Houses,
where a woman shakes a tablecloth
out after supper.

A pale flickering. Gone.
The Tantramar marshes
and the smell of salt hay.
An iron bridge trembles
and a loose plank rattles
but doesn't give way.

On the left, a red light
swims through the dark:
a ship's port lantern.
Two rubber boots show,
illuminated, solemn.
A dog gives one bark.

A woman climbs in
with two market bags,
brisk, freckled, elderly.
"A grand night. Yes, sir,
all the way to Boston."
She regards us amicably.

Moonlight as we enter
the New Brunswick woods,
hairy, scratchy, splintery;
moonlight and mist
caught in them like lamb's wool
on bushes in a pasture.

The passengers lie back.
Snores. Some long sighs.
A dreamy divagation

begins in the night,
a gentle, auditory,
slow hallucination. . . .

In the creakings and noises,
an old conversation
--not concerning us,
but recognizable, somewhere,
back in the bus:
Grandparents' voices

uninterruptedly
talking, in Eternity:
names being mentioned,
things cleared up finally;
what he said, what she said,
who got pensioned;

deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened.
She died in childbirth.
That was the son lost
when the schooner foundered.

He took to drink. Yes.
She went to the bad.
When Amos began to pray
even in the store and
finally the family had
to put him away.

"Yes . . ." that peculiar
affirmative. "Yes . . ."
A sharp, indrawn breath,
half groan, half acceptance,
that means "Life's like that.
We know it (also death)."

Talking the way they talked
in the old featherbed,
peacefully, on and on,
dim lamplight in the hall,
down in the kitchen, the dog
tucked in her shawl.

Now, it's all right now
even to fall asleep
just as on all those nights.
--Suddenly the bus driver
stops with a jolt,
turns off his lights.

A moose has come out of
the impenetrable wood
and stands there, looms, rather,
in the middle of the road.
It approaches; it sniffs at
the bus's hot hood.

Towering, antlerless,
high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).
A man's voice assures us
"Perfectly harmless. . . ."

Some of the passengers
exclaim in whispers,
childishly, softly,
"Sure are big creatures."
"It's awful plain."
"Look! It's a she!"

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

"Curious creatures,"
says our quiet driver,
rolling his r's.
"Look at that, would you."
Then he shifts gears.
For a moment longer,

by craning backward,
the moose can be seen
on the moonlit macadam;
then there's a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Shampoo

The still explosions on the rocks,
the lichens, grow
by spreading, gray, concentric shocks.
They have arranged
to meet the rings around the moon, although
within our memories they have not changed.

And since the heavens will attend
as long on us,
you've been, dear friend,
precipitate and pragmatical;
and look what happens. For Time is
nothing if not amenable.

The shooting stars in your black hair
in bright formation
are flocking where,
so straight, so soon?
--Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
battered and shiny like the moon.

Elizabeth Bishop

The Unbeliever

He sleeps on the top of a mast. - Bunyan

He sleeps on the top of a mast
with his eyes fast closed.
The sails fall away below him
like the sheets of his bed,
leaving out in the air of the night the sleeper's head.

Asleep he was transported there,
asleep he curled
in a gilded ball on the mast's top,
or climbed inside
a gilded bird, or blindly seated himself astride.

"I am founded on marble pillars,"
said a cloud. "I never move.
See the pillars there in the sea?"
Secure in introspection
he peers at the watery pillars of his reflection.

A gull had wings under his
and remarked that the air
was "like marble." He said: "Up here
I tower through the sky
for the marble wings on my tower-top fly."

But he sleeps on the top of his mast
with his eyes closed tight.
The gull inquired into his dream,
which was, "I must not fall.
The spangled sea below wants me to fall.
It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all."

Elizabeth Bishop

The Weed

I dreamed that dead, and meditating,
I lay upon a grave, or bed,
(at least, some cold and close-built bower).
In the cold heart, its final thought
stood frozen, drawn immense and clear,
stiff and idle as I was there;
and we remained unchanged together
for a year, a minute, an hour.
Suddenly there was a motion,
as startling, there, to every sense
as an explosion. Then it dropped
to insistent, cautious creeping
in the region of the heart,
prodding me from desperate sleep.
I raised my head. A slight young weed
had pushed up through the heart and its
green head was nodding on the breast.
(All this was in the dark.)
It grew an inch like a blade of grass;
next, one leaf shot out of its side
a twisting, waving flag, and then
two leaves moved like a semaphore.
The stem grew thick. The nervous roots
reached to each side; the graceful head
changed its position mysteriously,
since there was neither sun nor moon
to catch its young attention.
The rooted heart began to change
(not beat) and then it split apart
and from it broke a flood of water.
Two rivers glanced off from the sides,
one to the right, one to the left,
two rushing, half-clear streams,
(the ribs made of them two cascades)
which assuredly, smooth as glass,
went off through the fine black grains of earth.
The weed was almost swept away;
it struggled with its leaves,
lifting them fringed with heavy drops.
A few drops fell upon my face
and in my eyes, so I could see
(or, in that black place, thought I saw)
that each drop contained a light,
a small, illuminated scene;
the weed-deflected stream was made
itself of racing images.
(As if a river should carry all
the scenes that it had once reflected
shut in its waters, and not floating
on momentary surfaces.)
The weed stood in the severed heart.
"What are you doing there?" I asked.

It lifted its head all dripping wet
(with my own thoughts?)
and answered then: "I grow," it said,
"but to divide your heart again."

Elizabeth Bishop

To Be Written on the Mirror in Whitewash

I live only here, between your eyes and you,
But I live in your world. What do I do?
--Collect no interest--otherwise what I can;
Above all I am not that staring man.

Elizabeth Bishop

Trouvée

Oh, why should a hen
have been run over
on West 4th Street
in the middle of summer?

She was a white hen
--red-and-white now, of course.
How did she get there?
Where was she going?

Her wing feathers spread
flat, flat in the tar,
all dirtied, and thin
as tissue paper.

A pigeon, yes,
or an English sparrow,
might meet such a fate,
but not that poor fowl.

Just now I went back
to look again.
I hadn't dreamed it:
there is a hen

turned into a quaint
old country saying
scribbled in chalk
(except for the beak).

Elizabeth Bishop

View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress

Moving from left to left, the light
is heavy on the Dome, and coarse.
One small lunette turns it aside
and blankly stares off to the side
like a big white old wall-eyed horse.

On the east steps the Air Force Band
in uniforms of Air Force blue
is playing hard and loud, but - queer -
the music doesn't quite come through.

It comes in snatches, dim then keen,
then mute, and yet there is no breeze.
The giant trees stand in between.
I think the trees must intervene,

catching the music in their leaves
like gold-dust, till each big leaf sags.
Unceasingly the little flags
feed their limp stripes into the air,
and the band's efforts vanish there.

Great shades, edge over,
give the music room.
The gathered brasses want to bo
boom - boom.

Elizabeth Bishop

Visits to St Elizabeths

This is the house of Bedlam.

This is the man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the time
of the tragic man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a wristwatch
telling the time
of the talkative man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a sailor
wearing the watch
that tells the time
of the honored man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the roadstead all of board
reached by the sailor
wearing the watch
that tells the time
of the old, brave man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

These are the years and the walls of the ward,
the winds and clouds of the sea of board
sailed by the sailor
wearing the watch
that tells the time
of the cranky man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
over the creaking sea of board
beyond the sailor
winding his watch
that tells the time
of the cruel man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a world of books gone flat.
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
over the creaking sea of board
of the batty sailor
that winds his watch
that tells the time
of the busy man

that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a boy that pats the floor
to see if the world is there, is flat,
for the widowed Jew in the newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
waltzing the length of a weaving board
by the silent sailor
that hears his watch
that ticks the time
of the tedious man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

These are the years and the walls and the door
that shut on a boy that pats the floor
to feel if the world is there and flat.
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances joyfully down the ward
into the parting seas of board
past the staring sailor
that shakes his watch
that tells the time
of the poet, the man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the soldier home from the war.
These are the years and the walls and the door
that shut on a boy that pats the floor
to see if the world is round or flat.
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat
that dances carefully down the ward,
walking the plank of a coffin board
with the crazy sailor
that shows his watch
that tells the time
of the wretched man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

Elizabeth Bishop

While Someone Telephones

Wasted, wasted minutes that couldn't be worse,
minutes of a barbaric condescension.
--Stare out the bathroom window at the fir-trees,
at their dark needles, accretions to no purpose
woodenly crystallized, and where two fireflies
are only lost.
Hear nothing but a train that goes by, must go by, like tension;
nothing. And wait:
maybe even now these minutes' host
emerges, some relaxed uncondescending stranger,
the heart's release.
And while the fireflies
are failing to illuminate these nightmare trees
might they not be his green gay eyes.

Elizabeth Bishop