

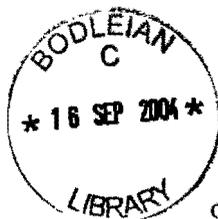
COMPLETE POEMS

Elizabeth Bishop

With an introduction by Tom Paulin

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

Contents



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Publisher's Note xi

Introduction xiii

NORTH & SOUTH

The Map 3

The Imaginary Iceberg 4

Casabianca 5

The Colder the Air 6

Wading at Wellfleet 7

Chemin de Fer 8

The Gentleman of Shalott 9

Large Bad Picture 11

From the Country to the City 13

The Man-Moth 14

Love Lies Sleeping 16

A Miracle for Breakfast 18

The Weed 20

The Unbeliever 22

The Monument 23

Paris, 7 A.M. 26

Quai d'Orléans 28

Sleeping on the Ceiling 29

Sleeping Standing Up 30

Cirque d'Hiver 31

Florida 32

Jerónimo's House 34

- *Roosters* 35

Seascape 40

Little Exercise 41

The Fish 42

Late Air 45

Cootchie 46

Songs for a Colored Singer 47

Anaphora 52

FROM THE FRENCH

- Max Jacob
Rainbow 265
Patience of an Angel 266
 Banks 267
Hell Is Graduated 268

FROM THE SPANISH

- Octavio Paz
The Key of Water 269
Along Galeana Street 270
The Grove 271
January First 273
Objects & Apparitions 275

INDEXES

- Index of Titles* 279
Index of First Lines 283

Publisher's Note

This book contains all the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, from "Behind Stowe" and "To a Tree," written at sixteen, which appeared in the Walnut Hill School magazine in 1927, to "Sonnet," published in *The New Yorker* after her death in 1979. She would not have reprinted the seventeen poems written in her youth; she was too severe a critic of her own work. Yet the variety and range of these early poems are part of her poetic development. Her attitude toward her work was at times unpredictable: she never reprinted "Exchanging Hats," a poem that belongs among her best. First published in *New World Writing* in 1956, it appears here with "Uncollected Poems (1979)." The background of "Pleasure Seas," which appears here for the first time, is odd. Written in 1939, it was accepted by *Harper's Bazaar* but never printed; the sole surviving copy was found among her papers. In the group of occasional poems, there are four which she enclosed in letters to Marianne Moore in the mid-thirties. It was Miss Moore who arranged for her first publication in book form in an anthology, *Trial Balances* (1935).

This edition also includes corrections and changes Elizabeth Bishop made in some of her poems. We are grateful to Alice Methfessel for authorizing this book; to Frank Bidart and Lloyd Schwartz for editorial advice; to Lisa Browar, Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at Vassar College, for locating the only copy of "Pleasure Seas"; to Frani Muser and Margaret Miller, Elizabeth's close friends at college, for helping decipher the corrected typescript of this poem; to Candace MacMahon for her reliable bibliography (University Press of Virginia, 1980); and to Cynthia Krupat, whose designs always delighted Elizabeth, for the typography and format of *The Complete Poems*.

Introduction

Elizabeth Bishop is one of the finest, one of the most formally perfect poets of the second half of the twentieth century. Poets such as Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Anne Stevenson, Fleur Adcock, Paul Muldoon, Craig Raine, Christopher Reid, Jamey McKendrick and Jo Shapcott, have testified, both in the practice of their art and in essays and lectures on her poetry, to the unchallengeable subtlety and complex formal beauty of her work. A poet's poet, she is also pre-eminently a reader's poet, who avoids recondite subjects or allusions, and communicates with an eager, unforced directness. She won many literary prizes and she has also attracted a wide and growing audience. In the 1960s and for part of the 1970s, her close friend and admirer Robert Lowell was the dominant poet in English, but after Lowell's death in 1977, and the growing recognition that his last three volumes were failures, critical attention began to shift toward Bishop. But because she never came out as a lesbian, and because she refused to have her work included in all-women anthologies, there was still some resistance to her work – she was seen as insufficiently political, a mis-reading of her work, which identifies with black Americans, and with the struggle of the poor and oppressed in South America. Now she is recognised as more gifted, more successful as a poetic practitioner than either Lowell or John Berryman.

Although it is invidious to set up hierarchies of talent, it is important to recognise her pre-eminent genius. She studies perfection in her work, but she also prevents it from becoming too insistent by introducing an edgy counter-movement toward ugliness, incompleteness, pain and deprivation. So in 'Cape Breton' (page 67) the weaving 'silken water' is offset by 'hackmatack' (a hard American spruce), by the 'irregular nervous saw-tooth edge', and by the 'rough-adzed pole'. Bishop's personal life was often unhappy – two lovers committed suicide – and she became an alcoholic as a young woman. Behind the formal façade of her poems, there is a

homeless, orphaned imagination, whose loneliness was expressed in her insatiable letter-writing and in late-night phone calls to friends.

She was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on 11 February 1911. Her mother was from Nova Scotia, her father, who was half Canadian, half American, died in 1911, eight months after she was born. Her mother became deeply disorientated over the next five years, was diagnosed as permanently insane in 1916 and died in a public sanatorium in Nova Scotia in 1934. Bishop lived alternately with her grandparents in Nova Scotia and New England, and later with an aunt. She started school in Nova Scotia, but had poor health and hadn't much formal education until she was fifteen. She attended public and private schools in New England, and in 1930 went to Vassar College.

Bishop impressed everyone she met – she was musical, very well read, and was also a gifted amateur artist, with an abiding interest in naïve art, which she collected and sometimes imitated in her paintings (her paintings have been collected and published in *Exchanging Hats: Elizabeth Bishop Paintings*, ed. William Benton). She was a compulsive traveller, and this need to be always on the move can be felt in an extraordinary piece of prose which she contributed to the *Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies* in 1933:

One afternoon last fall I was studying very hard, bending over my book with my back to the light of the high double windows. Concentration was so difficult that I had dug myself a sort of little black cave into the subject I was reading, and there I burrowed and scratched, like the Count of Monte Cristo, expecting Heaven knows what sudden revelation. My own thoughts, conflicting with those of the book, were making such a wordy racket that I heard and saw nothing – until the page before my eyes blushed pink. I was startled, then realized that there must be a sunset at my back, and waited a minute trying to guess the color of it from the color of the little reflection. As I waited I heard a multitude of small sounds, and knew simultaneously that I had been hearing them all along, – sounds high in the air, of a faintly rhythmic irregularity, yet resembling the retreat of innumerable small waves, lake-waves, rustling on sand.

Of course it was the birds going South. They were very high up, a fairly large sort of bird, I couldn't tell what, but almost speck-like, paying no attention to even the highest trees or steeples. They spread across a wide swath of sky, each rather alone, and at first their wings seemed all to be beating perfectly together. But by watching one bird, then another, I saw that some flew a little slower than others, some were trying to get ahead and some flew at an individual rubato; each seemed a variation, and yet altogether my eyes were deceived into thinking them perfectly precise and regular. I watched closely the spaces between the birds. It was as if there were an invisible thread joining all the outside birds and within this fragile net-work they possessed the sky; it was down among them, of a paler color, moving with them. The interspaces moved in pulsation too, catching up and continuing the motion of the wings in wakes, carrying it on, as the rest in music does – not a blankness but a space as musical as all the sound.

The birds came in groups, each taking four or five minutes to fly over; then a pause of two or three minutes and the next group appeared. I must have watched them for almost an hour before I realized that the same relationships of birds and spaces I had noticed in the small groups were true of the whole migration at once. The next morning when I got up and went to the window they were still going over, and all that day and part of the next whenever I remembered to listen or look up they were still there.

It came to me that the flying birds were setting up, far over my head, a sort of time-pattern, or rather patterns, all closely related, all minutely varied, and yet all together forming the *migration*, which probably in the date of its flight and its actual flying time was as mathematically regular as the planets. There was the individual rate of each bird, its rate in relation to all the other birds, the speed of the various groups, and then that mysterious swath they made through the sky, leaving it somehow emptied and stilled, slowly assuming its usual coloring and far-away look. Yet all this motion with its effect of precision, of *passing* the time along, as the clock passes it along from minute to minute, was to result in the end in a thing so inevitable, so absolute, as to mean nothing connected with the passage of time at all – a static fact of the world, the birds here or there, always; a fact that may hurry

the seasons along for us, but as far as bird migration goes, stands still and infinite.

This is an epiphany where Bishop designs and describes the moment when she first realised her vocation as a poet. After pointing to that 'faintly rhythmic irregularity', she adds 'of course it was the birds going South.' When we read her poems, we can see that that 'sort of little black cave' she dips into begins the theme of dwelling, of being-in-the-world, which in her poems acts as counter-theme to migration and travel. We can also see her beginning to work out the relation of regular form and timing to irregular or distorted rhythm. This is written prose, but it has a finely spoken texture, as in that little spontaneous addition 'lake-waves', which blocks what would have otherwise been the ordinary rhythm of 'yet resembling the retreat of innumerable small waves rustling on sand'.

Her fascination with complicated poetic rhythms right from the beginning of her career shows in a note on timing in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry, which she contributed to the same student journal the following year, and where she says 'sense is the quality which permits mechanical irregularities while preserving the unique feeling of timeliness in the poem.' The migrating – we assume – Canada geese design an intricate and complex pattern of sounds, which marries mathematical form with process and with dissonant irregularity.

The roots of Bishop's art can be traced to her undergraduate years at Vassar, and in particular to a seminal essay she read there. It is called 'The Baroque Style in Prose', and is by the distinguished scholar M.W. Croll, who argues that the baroque style's purpose was to portray 'not a thought, but a mind thinking'. The baroque artists knew that 'an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced.' Bishop quotes this passage in a letter to the poet Donald E. Stanford (20 November 1933). What she admired in the baroque was the 'ardour' and dramatic energy and immediacy of an idea as it was formulated and experienced. The result is a poetry of intense visual and vocal power, where the play of rhythm, rhyme, spoken inflection and carefully composed, sometimes abraded images, have a spontaneity and

deft authority whose perfect cadences create that 'unique feeling of timeliness' which she sought and admired in poetry. That feeling of timeliness must, she said, be combined with 'mechanical irregularities', and both qualities are present in her account of the bird migration she describes in that early piece of prose, where she recognises and embraces her vocation as poet. So in 'Cape Breton', she places against the rapid movement of the song-sparrow songs as they float upward 'freely, dispassionately, through the mist', the sudden short, heavily stressed line 'in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets'.

We can see her delight in rapidly changing tones and surfaces in one of her wittiest and most painterly poems, 'Seascape' (p. 40), where she at first describes 'white herons got up as angels, / flying as high as they want'. As she develops this image of birds in flight, her delicate ear starts a run of *ee* sounds: the herons fly 'in tiers and tiers of immaculate reflections'. In the next line the word 'region' picks up the *ee* sound, then hands it on to 'bright green leaves edged neatly with bird-droppings'. The reason why Bishop appeals so strongly to fellow poets can be seen in that sudden, uncomfortable verb 'edged', which breaks the pair of *ee* sounds in 'green leaves', before letting it come back with emphasis in 'neatly'. The two *ds* in 'edged' are echoed in 'bird-droppings' to design a deliberately uncomfortable, bad-taste moment, which frays against the aesthetic surface she is designing, a surface she reasserts by transforming their faecal randomness into 'illumination in silver'. This effect is one expression of her puritan upbringing – it introduces an anxiety into the delineation of a beautiful image, and this discomfiting effect then serves to strengthen and make more flexible the particular aesthetic moment.

Bishop as always invites her reader to watch her artistry with the keenest observation. She asks us not to hunt for themes and subjects, but to give an absolute attention to 'not a thought, but a mind thinking'. Therefore in the *process* of aesthetic discovery which is 'Seascape', she doesn't want to let go of that *ee* sound, and so she brings it back in 'the beautiful pea-green back-pasture'. The two adjectives carry an ironic inflection as they tip us toward the familiar territory of the owl and the pussycat

in their beautiful pea-green boat. In doing so, they introduce a note of whimsy and nonsense that prepares us for the change of subject in the poem, as well as subtly ironising the otherwise rather precious 'cartoon by Raphael for a tapestry for a Pope'.

The first thirteen lines are all one sentence, with an energetic vocal emphasis on 'does' in line thirteen, an emphasis which underlines the ardour of her conception. This is the terminus of the poem's self-delighting, aesthetic wallowing:

But a skeletal lighthouse standing there
in black and white clerical dress,
who lives on his nerves, thinks he knows better.

The poem shifts from the baroque to the naïve, though there is a clever link back to the opening line: 'This celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels,' where that adjective 'celestial' is picked up by 'skeletal'. We have moved from the baroque south to the moral north of children's or naïve art. We are in the territory of Scotch-Irish dissent, with a clerical, masculine lighthouse that still comes as a relief. Bishop plays it gently back against the sensuous, sophisticated catholicism of the first part of the poem.

In 'Seascape' Bishop's subject isn't nature, but art, hence the campy tone she can, always very tightly, adopt. This subject she outlines in a very important letter she wrote to Donald Stanford on 1 December 1933. In it she says:

I think what I was saying about subject matter was something like this: All the primary poetic sources have been made use of and we're in possession of a world made up of poetry, the natural world. Now for people like myself the things to write poems about are in a way second-degree things – removed once more from this natural world. It's like Holland being built up out of the sea – and I think that I am attempting to put some further small structures on top of Holland. But from the poems of yours I've read so far, I'd say that you are rather making use of the primary sources. If you have any idea what it is I'm talking about I wish you'd tell me what you think, because I find it very interesting to speculate on such things.

In 'Seascape' she is writing of 'second-degree things' – a baroque painting, gothic architecture, naïve painting. But in order to prevent the poem from taking in the precious or fixed style of a self-conscious aficionado, she introduces that emphatic vocal tone in 'does' and in the last line's 'strongly worded', a line which asks to be voiced in the tone of someone imitating the official gravitas of a humourless and philistine preacher. Bishop the youthful story-teller, singer and musician is present here, and this means that her persona is often that of a performer. Here, she is true to Croll's essay on baroque prose style – this is not a fixed thought, but a mind thinking.

We can see this type of reflective inflection in the early, rather laboured poem 'The Monument' (p. 23), which ends:

It is the beginning of a painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely.

That final injunction – 'Watch it closely' – breaks with the woodiness of the earlier lines and frees us from their rigidity and claustrophobia, while making a bridge over the caesura through the alliterating *us*, while using the liquid *s* sound and the two labial *ks* to lubricate its dry woodiness.

What Bishop admires is the temporary, the flexible, the flimsy – values she sets against those masculine values represented by the 'gun-metal blue dark' at the beginning of 'Roosters' (p. 35). Carefully she places 'Jerónimo's House' (p. 34) before 'Roosters', and populates it with second-degree things: a wasp's nest, chewed-up paper, a wicker table, blue chairs, big beads, palm leaf fans, a calendar, fried fish, tissue-paper roses, an old French horn, writing paper, radio voices, flamenco songs, lottery numbers. With its short, then even shorter alternating lines, this poem has a throwaway, improvised, song-like quality, which in the first stanza is braced by its plosives:

My house, my fairy
palace, is
of perishable

clapboards with
three rooms in all,
my gray wasps' nest
of chewed-up paper
glued with spit.

The word 'fairy' contains 'airy', for this is the palace of the imagination, whose medium, like the radio's, is air. It is a female building, the work of a bricoleur, who assumes a man's voice, but a delicate, drifting, unisistent voice that refuses to be 'violent and bitter' in order to 'rear in stone' as W.B. Yeats puts it in his 'Ancestral Houses'.

The 'uncontrolled, traditional cries' of the roosters in the next poem glance back at all the phallic rhetoric which 'Jerónimo's House' refuses to suggest. A subject Bishop is glancing at here is the terminal nature of a particular and influential type of male personality. This is the subject of one of her finest masterpieces, 'Crusoe in England' (p. 162), where with a tender and gentle irony she confronts the solitary dissenter, who has left one island kingdom for another. This is the autonomous, traditional male displaced to another time, an anachronism like his allusion to Wordsworth:

Why didn't I know enough of something?
Greek drama or astronomy? The books
I'd read were full of blanks;
the poems – well, I tried
reciting to my iris-beds,
"They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss . . ." The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was look it up.

In her letter to Donald Stanford, Bishop talks about her subject matter being 'second-degree things', which resemble 'Holland being built out of the sea', and this is the subject of one of her most assured poems, 'The Bight' (p. 60), which begins with a muddy tidal basin:

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.

The third line has the spoken, repetitive form of 'small waves, lake-waves, rustling on sand' in that early prose description of birds migrating. It has three *i* sounds which pick up 'tide' and 'white' in the two previous lines. Those repeated sounds emphasise the dryness of the bight, and are meant to be uncomfortable because the white, crumbling ribs of marl also bring a skeletal image into play. Characteristically, Bishop changes nature into technology, cultural artefact, second-degree object, by remarking that the sea is 'the color of a gas flame turned as low as possible.' Anyone who is used to a multiracial environment will find those whites and blues cold and unsettling, and Bishop knows this because she suddenly moves from the sound of the dredges to remark 'if one were Baudelaire/one could probably hear it turning to marimba music,' which develops a miscegenating theme, as she moves from European high culture to African Mexican music.

Bishop then introduces dissonant sound when she shows the 'little ocher dredge' working off the edge of the dock and always making a noise she compares to 'dry perfectly off-beat claves.' This reintroduces the dry sound and theme, as well as extending the multiracial theme, because a clave is a round stick made from a special kind of hard wood found in Cuba.

The theme of failure, which the subtitle 'On my birthday' introduces, and which the theme of dryness develops, is glanced at when she remarks of the little white boats that they lie 'on their sides, stove in,/and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm'. The second, slightly halting line gives the illusion of being the poem's final line: it has an air of over-emphatic finality, but Bishop turns it with a comma, and closes the sentence with: 'like torn-open, unanswered letters.' She then wittily reintroduces the Baudelaire theme, remarking in a terse single line: 'The bight is littered with old correspondences.' Here, she picks up Baudelaire's 'Correspondences', where he states:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

(Nature is a temple whose living pillars sometimes utter confused words; we cross it through forests of symbols that watch us with knowing eyes.)

She is also drawing on a passage in a recent letter to Robert Lowell, which she wrote from Key West, and where after some literary gossip, she says:

The water looks like blue gas – the harbor is always a mess, here, junky little boats all piled up, some hung with sponges and always a few half sunk or splintered up from the most recent hurricane. It reminds me a little of my desk. (1 January 1948)

This passage is sometimes cited by critics as a dummy run for the poem, but this is to misjudge Bishop's letters, a selection of which are published in *One Art*, edited by Robert Giroux. Bishop belongs with Keats and Hopkins as one of the greatest masters of the art of letter writing. Her prose sentence isn't simply a staging-post to the poem: notice how the half-rhyme *gas/mess* helps structure the sentence, while the nimble rapidity of 'junky little boats all piled up', and the complex of chiming sounds – *junky/hung/sponges/sunk* – tense the poem into an exact expressive arc. (Bishop was also a gifted short story writer, and her stories are included in *The Collected Prose*, also edited by Robert Giroux.)

The 'impalpable drafts' on which the man-of-war birds soar make a pun on written drafts, for this is a poem about air and imagination like 'Jerónimo's House'. But the line about old correspondences stops the poem dead in its tracks. This forces us to identify and assess what those correspondences are: dry colour, dry sound, dry textures, water turning to gas to marimba music. There is also a visual V theme – pickaxes, scissor-like tails, chicken wire (double Vs, that is diamond shapes), wishbones and shark tails. This gives a provisional or

improvised cubist shape to the composition, a formal structure which is challenged by:

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.

This is a moment from a child's painting, which also in 'frowsy' puts the bad-taste theme back in play. It also develops the nature/consumption or 'second order' theme, which is present in the next lines:

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.

The blue-gray shark tails and the Chinese-restaurant trade pick up and play against what I've suggested are the WASPish blue and white of the opening lines. When I first read the poem, I thought it was set in New England, until the sponge boats took me south, but I've no doubt Bishop intended to begin with a cold effect, which would help emphasise the skeletal image in 'crumbling ribs of marl'. We are meant to see random half-buried ribs here, as if the tide has uncovered a graveyard.

The word 'correspondences' carries a scrambled 'end' in it and, as I've suggested, acts as a false closure. Then Bishop picks up the dry ringing claves:

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

Like a metal dinosaur, the dredge lifts up the marl it bites into – another pun. Then Bishop allows the ugly, untidy, quotidian, utile activity to continue before making it sweet in the final line

which rhymes with 'jawful of marl' and at the very last moment draws everything into perfect form.

Bishop, who was friendly with Billie Holiday, was fascinated by black speech, and in poetry classes, her favourite example of iambic pentameter was the first line of the Blues song, which begins: 'I hate to see the evenin sun go down'. She pays tribute to that speech in 'Songs for a Colored Singer' (p. 47):

The neighbours got a radio with an aerial;
we got a little portable.
They got a lot of closet space;
we got a suitcase.

It's this type of vocal deftness that we see again in her poems, where it is the equivalent of what Robert Frost terms 'sentence sound', but with an unselfconscious naturalness that is spontaneous and unforced, as in 'The Moose' on p. 169.

The stringent, or astringent, fineness of Bishop's acoustic texture can be seen in her brilliance as a translator. My favourite is her version of 'Sonnet of Intimacy' by Vinicius de Moraes (p. 262), which in a literal translation from the Portuguese reads:

I go sometimes I follow by the pasture now
chewing a straw my chest nude sticking out
in unreal pyjamas from three years back
I go down to the river where are little streams
in order to go to drink at the fountain with water cold and
sonorous
and if I meet or come across a spot of red in a blackberry bush
I spit blood at the corral rail

I breathe the good odour of manure
between the cows and oxen that look at me without envy
and when by chance a piss sounds out
followed by a look not without jealousy
we all of us animals without commotion
piss all in common in a feast of foam

In her version, as in 'The Bight', she puts blueness under pressure, saying that 'there's too much blue air'. She wants *s* sounds, susurrus, always a danger in a line of verse, because so easily overdone, but every line she sets down, including the title, has at least one *s*. The phrase 'a blade of sticky grass' has two *s* sounds and a bad-taste discomfort, which is developed by the 'threadbare pyjamas'. Then Bishop puts the dominant *s* sound with the plosive *p*: *spot* and *spit*. She then builds through the next five lines toward the final, arresting and releasing line – 'Partake together of a pleasant piss' – where the first two plosives seem to combine in 'piss', which gives the last plosive even more force, just as the last two *ss* seem to sound a double susurrus that rhymes back through 'unmalicious' and 'his' to 'delicious', which in the very last word, 'piss', catches the ecstasy and relief of full and complete micturation. In the original, de Moraes writes 'festa de espuma' ('festival of spray'), but Bishop's closing 'pleasant piss' improves on it.

'Sonnet of Intimacy' is one of the results of Bishop's fifteen-year stay in Brazil. She moved there in 1952 to live with Lota de Macedo Soares, moving back to New York in 1967. Lota committed suicide in New York that year, and Bishop briefly returned to Brazil two years later, before returning to the USA the following year. Though she continued to travel, she based herself in the United States, and died in Boston on the 6 October 1979. She is one of the greatest American poets of the last century, and a subtle and persistent critic of her country's power.

Tom Paulin
2004

Jerónimo's House

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

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

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

and four blue chairs
and an affair
for the smallest baby
with a tray
with ten big beads.
Then on the walls
two palm-leaf fans
and a calendar

and on the table
one fried fish
spattered with burning
scarlet sauce,
a little dish
of hominy grits
and four pink tissue-
paper roses.

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

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

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

Roosters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the many wives
who lead hens' lives
of being courted and despised;

deep from raw throats
a senseless order floats
all over town. A rooster gloats

over our beds
from rusty iron sheds
and fences made from old bedsteads,

over our churches
where the tin rooster perches,
over our little wooden northern houses,

making sallies
from all the muddy alleys,
marking out maps like Rand McNally's:

glass-headed pins,
oil-golds and copper greens,
anthracite blues, alizarins,

each one an active
displacement in perspective;
each screaming, "This is where I live!"

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

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

"Very combative . . ."
what right have you to give
commands and tell us how to live,

cry "Here!" and "Here!"
and wake us here where are
unwanted love, conceit and war?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Old holy sculpture
could set it all together
in one small scene, past and future:

Christ stands amazed,
Peter, two fingers raised
to surprised lips, both as if dazed.

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

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

yes, and there Peter's tears
run down our chancicleer's
sides and gem his spurs.

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

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

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

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

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

all the assembly
that "Deny deny deny"
is not all the roosters cry.

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

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

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

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

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

12 O'Clock News

As you all know, tonight is the night of the full moon, half the world over. But here the moon seems to hang motionless in the sky. It gives very little light; it could be dead. Visibility is poor. Nevertheless, we shall try to give you some idea of the lay of the land and the present situation.

gooseneck
lamp

The escarpment that rises abruptly from the central plain is in heavy shadow, but the elaborate terracing of its southern glacis gleams faintly in the dim light, like fish scales. What endless labor those small, peculiarly shaped terraces represent! And yet, on them the welfare of this tiny principality depends.

typewriter

A slight landslide occurred in the northwest about an hour ago. The exposed soil appears to be of poor quality: almost white, calcareous, and shaly. There are believed to have been no casualties.

pile of mss.

Almost due north, our aerial reconnaissance reports the discovery of a large rectangular "field," hitherto unknown to us, obviously man-made. It is dark-speckled. An airstrip? A cemetery?

typed sheet

In this small, backward country, one of the most backward left in the world today, communications are crude and "industrialization" and its products almost nonexistent. Strange to say, however, signboards are on a truly gigantic scale.

envelopes

We have also received reports of a mysterious, oddly shaped, black structure, at an undisclosed distance to the east. Its presence was revealed only because its highly polished surface catches such feeble

moonlight as prevails. The natural resources of the country being far from completely known to us, there is the possibility that this may be, or may contain, some powerful and terrifying "secret weapon." On the other hand, given what we *do* know, or have learned from our anthropologists and sociologists about this people, it may well be nothing more than a *numen*, or a great altar recently erected to one of their gods, to which, in their present historical state of superstition and helplessness, they attribute magical powers, and may even regard as a "savior," one last hope of rescue from their grave difficulties.

ink-bottle

At last! One of the elusive natives has been spotted! He appears to be — rather, to have been — a unicyclist-courier, who may have met his end by falling from the height of the escarpment because of the deceptive illumination. Alive, he would have been small, but undoubtedly proud and erect, with the thick, bristling black hair typical of the indigenes.

typewriter
eraser

From our superior vantage point, we can clearly see into a sort of dugout, possibly a shell crater, a "nest" of soldiers. They lie heaped together, wearing the camouflage "battle dress" intended for "winter warfare." They are in hideously contorted positions, all dead. We can make out at least eight bodies. These uniforms were designed to be used in guerrilla warfare on the country's one snow-covered mountain peak. The fact that these poor soldiers are wearing them *here*, on the plain, gives further proof, if proof were necessary, either of the childishness and hopeless impracticality of this inscrutable people, our opponents, or of the sad corruption of their leaders.

ashtray

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 averted eyes, we wonder
what slow changes they see under
their vast, shady, turned-down brim.

1956