

## 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 its mouth.  
He didn't fight.  
He hadn't fought at all.  
He hung a grunting weight,  
battered and venerable  
and homely. Here and there  
his brown skin hung in strips  
like ancient wallpaper,  
and its pattern of darker brown  
was like wallpaper:  
shapes like full-blown roses  
stained and lost through age.  
He was speckled with barnacles,  
fine rosettes of lime,  
and infested  
with tiny white sea-lice,  
and underneath two or three  
rags of green weed hung down.  
While his gills were breathing in  
the terrible oxygen  
— the frightening gills,  
fresh and crisp with blood,  
that can cut so badly —  
I thought of the coarse white flesh  
packed in like feathers,  
the big bones and the little bones,  
the dramatic reds and blacks  
of his shiny entrails,  
and the pink swim-bladder  
like a big peony.  
I looked into his eyes  
which were far larger than mine  
but shallower, and yellowed,  
the irises backed and packed  
with tarnished tinfoil

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

**Elizabeth Bishop, 1946**

### 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, 1948**

**Skunk Hour***for Elizabeth Bishop*

Nautilus Island's hermit  
heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;  
her sheep still graze above the sea.  
Her son's a bishop. Her farmer  
is first selectman in our village,  
she's in her dotage.

Thirsting for  
the hierarchic privacy  
of Queen Victoria's century,  
she buys up all  
the eyesores facing her shore,  
and lets them fall.

The season's ill—  
we've lost our summer millionaire,  
who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean  
catalogue. His nine-knot yawl  
was auctioned off to lobstermen.  
A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.

And now our fairy  
decorator brightens his shop for fall,  
his fishnet's filled with orange cork,  
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl,  
there is no money in his work,  
he'd rather marry.

One dark night,  
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull,  
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,  
they lay together, hull to hull,  
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .  
My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,

'Love, O careless Love . . . .' I hear  
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
as if my hand were at its throat . . . .  
I myself am hell;  
nobody's here—

only skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church.

I stand on top  
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—  
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the  
garbage pail  
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup  
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,  
and will not scare.

**Robert Lowell, 1959**

**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, 1965**

**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 horse's 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 they're 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, 1978**



## Fern Hill

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
    The night above the dingle starry,  
    Time let me hail and climb  
    Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
    Trail with daisies and barley  
    Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns  
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,  
    In the sun that is young once only,  
    Time let me play and be  
    Golden in the mercy of his means,  
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves  
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,  
    And the sabbath rang slowly  
    In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay  
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air  
    And playing, lovely and watery  
    And fire green as grass.  
    And nightly under the simple stars  
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,  
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars  
    Flying with the ricks, and the horses  
    Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white  
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all  
    Shining, it was Adam and maiden,  
    The sky gathered again  
    And the sun grew round that very day.  
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light  
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm  
    Out of the whinnying green stable  
    On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house  
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,  
In the sun born over and over,  
I ran my heedless ways,  
My wishes raced through the house high hay  
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows  
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs  
Before the children green and golden  
Follow him out of grace.

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me  
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,  
In the moon that is always rising,  
Nor that riding to sleep  
I should hear him fly with the high fields  
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.  
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
Time held me green and dying  
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

**Dylan Thomas, 1945**

### **In My Craft or Sullen Art**

In my craft or sullen art  
Exercised in the still night  
When only the moon rages  
And the lovers lie abed  
With all their griefs in their arms,  
I labor by singing light  
Not for ambition or bread  
Or the strut and trade of charms  
On the ivory stages  
But for the common wages  
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart  
From the raging moon I write  
On these spindrift pages  
Nor for the towering dead  
With their nightingales and psalms  
But for the lovers, their arms  
Round the griefs of the ages,  
Who pay no praise or wages  
Nor heed my craft or art.

**Dylan Thomas, 1946**

### **Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night**

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

**Dylan Thomas, 1951**

## The Airy Tomb

Twm was a dunce at school, and was whipped and shaken  
More than I care to say, but without avail,  
For where one man can lead a horse to the pail  
Twenty can't make him drink what is not to his mind,  
And books and sums were poison to Tomos, he was stone blind  
To the print's magic; yet his grass-green eye  
Missed nor swoop nor swerve of the hawk's wing  
Past the high window, and the breeze could bring.  
Above the babble of the room's uproar,  
Songs to his ear from the sun-dusted moor,  
The grey curlew's whistle and the shrill, far cry  
Of circling buzzard . . . This was Twm at school,  
Subject to nothing but the sky and the wind's rule.  
And then at fourteen term ended and the lad was free.  
Scatheless as when he entered, he could write and spell  
No more than the clouds could or the dribbling rain,  
That scrawled vague messages on the window pane.

And so he returned to the Bwlch to help his father  
With the rough work of the farm, to ditch, and gather  
The slick ewes from the hill; to milk the cow,  
And coax the mare that dragged the discordant plough.  
Stepping with one stride thus from boy to man,  
His school books finished with, he now began  
Learning what none could teach but the hill people  
In that cold country, where grass and tree  
Are a green heritage more rich and rare  
Than a queen's emerald or an untouched maid.  
It were as well to bring the tup to the wild mare,  
Or put the heron and the hen to couple,  
As mate a stranger from the fat plain  
With that gaunt wilderness, where snow is laid  
Deadly as leprosy till the first of May,  
And a man counts himself lucky if All Saints' Day  
Finds his oats hived in the tottering barn.

But Tomos took to the life like a hillman born;  
His work was play after the dull school, and hands,  
Shamed by the pen's awkwardness, toyed with the fleece  
Of ewe and wether; eyes found a new peace  
Tracing the poems, which the rooks wrote in the sky.

So his shadow lengthened, and the years sped by  
With the wind's quickness; Twm had turned nineteen,  
When his father sickened and at the week's end died,  
Leaving him heir to the lean patch of land,  
Pinned to the hill-top, and the cloudy acres,  
Kept as a sheep-walk. At his mother's side  
He stood in the graveyard, where the undertaker  
Sprinkled earth rubble with a loud tattoo  
On the cheap coffin; but his heart was hurt  
By the gash in the ground, and too few, too few  
Were the tears that he dropped for that lonely man  
Beginning his journey to annihilation.  
He had seen sheep rotting in the wind and sun,  
And a hawk floating in a bubbling pool,  
Its weedy entrails mocking the breast  
Laced with bright water; but the dead and living  
Moved hand in hand on the mountain crest  
In the calm circle of taking and giving.  
A wide sepulchre of brisk, blue air  
Was the beasts' portion, but a mortal's lot  
The boards' strictness, and an ugly scar  
On the earth's surface, till the deliberate sod  
Sealed off for ever the green land he trod.

But the swift grass, that covered the unsightly wound  
In the prim churchyard, healed Tomos' mind  
Of its grave-sickness, and December shadows  
Dwindled to nothingness in the spring meadows,  
That were blowsy with orchis and the loose bog-cotton.  
Then the sun strengthened and the hush of June  
Settled like lichen on the thick-timbered house,  
Where Twm and his mother ate face to face

At the bare table, and each tick of the clock  
Was a nail knocked in the lid of the coffin  
Of that pale, spent woman, who sat with death  
Jogging her elbow through the hot, still days  
Of July and August, or passed like a ghost  
By the scurrying poultry — it was ever her boast  
Not to stay one winter with the goodman cold  
In his callous bed. Twm was bumpkin blind  
To the vain hysteria of a woman's mind,  
And prated of sheep fairs, but the first frost came  
To prove how ungarnished was the truth she told.

Can you picture Tomos now in the house alone,  
The room silent, and the last mourner gone  
Down the hill pathway? Did he sit by the flame  
Of his turf fire and watch till dawn  
The slow crumbling of the world he had known?  
Did he rebuild out of the ragged embers  
A new life, tempered to the sting of sorrow?  
Twm went to bed and woke on the grey morrow  
To the usual jobbery in sty and stable;  
Cleaned out the cow-house, harnessed the mare,  
And went prospecting with the keen ploughshare.  
Yet sometimes the day was dark, and the clouds remembered,  
Herded in the bare lanes of sky, the funeral rite,  
And Tomos about the house or set at table  
Was aware of something for which he had no name,  
Though the one tree, which dripped through the winter night  
With a clock's constancy, tried hard to tell  
The insensitive mind what the heart knew well.

But March squalls, making the windows rattle,  
Blew great gaps in his thoughts, till April followed  
With a new sweetness, that set the streams gossiping.  
On Easter Day he heard the first warbler sing  
In the quick ash by the door, and the snow made room  
On the sharp turf for the first fumbling lamb.  
Docking and grading now until after dark

In the green field or fold, there was too much work  
For the mind to wander, though the robin wove  
In the young hazel a sweet tale of love.  
And what is love to an uncultured youth  
In the desolate pastures, but the itch of cattle  
At set times and seasons? Twm rarely went down  
With his gay neighbours to the petticoat town  
In a crook of the valley, and his mind was free  
Of the dream pictures which lead to romance.  
Hearts and arrows, scribbled at the lane's entrance,  
Were a meaningless symbol, as esoteric  
As his school fractions; the one language he knew  
Was the shrill scream in the dark, the shadow within the shadow,  
The glimmer of flesh, deadly as mistletoe.

Of course there was talk in the parish, girls stood at their doors  
In November evenings, their glances busy as moths  
Round that far window; and some, whom passion made bolder  
As the buds opened, lagged in the bottom meadow  
And coughed and called. But never a voice replied  
From that grim house, nailed to the mountain side,  
For Tomos was up with the lambs, or stealthily hoarding  
The last light from the sky in his soul's crannies.  
So the tongues still wagged, and Tomos became a story  
To please a neighbour with, or raise the laughter  
In the lewd tavern, for folk cannot abide  
The inscrutable riddle, posed by their own kin.  
And you, hypocrite reader, at ease in your chair,  
Do not mock their conduct, for are you not also weary  
Of this odd tale, preferring the usual climax?  
He was not well-favoured, you think, nor gay, nor rich,  
But surely it happened that one of those supple bitches  
With the sly haunches angled him into her net  
At the male season, or, what is perhaps more romantic,  
Some lily-white maid, a clerk or a minister's daughter,  
With delicate hands, and eyes brittle as flowers  
Or curved sea-shells, taught him the tender airs  
Of a true gallant?

No, no, you must face the fact  
Of his long life alone in that crumbling house  
With winds rending the joints, and the grey rain's claws  
Sharp in the thatch; of his work up on the moors  
With the moon for candle, and the shrill rabble of stars  
Crowding his shoulders. For Twm was true to his fate,  
That wound solitary as a brook through the crimson heather,  
Trodden only by sheep, where youth and age  
Met in the circle of a buzzard's flight  
Round the blue axle of heaven; and a fortnight gone  
Was the shy soul from the festering flesh and bone  
When they found him there, entombed in the lucid weather.

**R. S. Thomas, 1946**

### **The Bright Field**

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the  
pearl of great price, the one field that had  
treasure in it. I realise now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

**R. S. Thomas, 1975**



## Emerging

Not as in the old days I pray,  
God. My life is not what it was.  
Yours, too, accepts the presence of  
the machine? Once I would have asked  
healing. I go now to be doctored,  
to drink sinlessly of the blood  
of my brother, to lend my flesh  
as manuscripts of the great poem  
of the scalpel. I would have knelt  
long, wrestling with you, wearing  
you down. Hear my prayers, Lord, hear  
my prayer. As though you were deaf, myriads  
of mortals have kept up their shrill  
cry, explaining their silence by  
their unfitness.

It begins to appear  
this is not what prayer is about.  
It is the annihilation of difference,  
the consciousness of myself in you,  
of you in me; the emerging  
from the adolescence of nature  
into the adult geometry  
of the mind. I begin to recognise  
you anew, God of form and number.  
There are questions we are the solution  
to, others whose echoes we must expand  
to contain. Circular as our way  
is, it leads not back to that snake-haunted  
garden, but onward to the tall city  
of glass that is the laboratory of the spirit.

**R. S. Thomas, 1975**