

THE MAP

Elizabeth Bishop

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 (1911-1979) is one of the twentieth century's most admired poets. Nova Scotia, Key West, Brazil are the places with the brightest colors on the maps Bishop made, but every scene she described, even the dingiest filling station, glows with vital description. Among her favorite images is the map, an emblem for her sustained question about the correspondence between our consciousness and world's reality. Characteristically, "The Map" is a rich field of interpretation teeming with news about our relationship with nature; indeed, by the very qualities of Bishop's language, one may know the force of subtlety and reserve, the sheer tact and wit we might bring to our engagement with nature. From The Complete Poems 1927-1979 by Elizabeth Bishop. Copyright © 1979, 1983 by Alice Helen Methfessel. Reprinted with permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.