The End of March

by Elizabeth Bishop

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Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,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.