Here Be Mermaids

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Always hypnotised by maps,
Their Flatland of experience,
We find they brandish less pretence
Than places occupied by chaps.

Most countries have a bumpy shape,
Odd, but familiar to you;
All oceans have been done in blue
Lovingly limned around each cape.

Wales resembles the head of a pig,
Italy a stylish boot,
Sri Lanka a single dangling fruit
But Canada looks merely big.

There often is a kind of umber
Used for some ropy mountain range.
Some islands are completely strange
(Albatross atolls at their slumber?).

Cities prove nothing more than dots,
Too small for politics or garbage;

A neat cartographer can manage
To fit in all the famous spots.

The past? That stood quite different:
Before the Empire’s flag was furled
Pink bits lay all around the world
To continent from continent.

Lovely the way bright maps can show
Produce, like jute or corn or leather,
Plus those that chart prevailing weather
In swathes of scarlet and indigo,

But mainly there is pleasure in
The way that life has been rolled flat;
From Zanzibar to Medicine hat
Society turns paper-thin.

Inexhaustibly fond of maps,
Their south-east Trades, their purple France,
We can read the colours in their dance
Across a papery Perhaps.