



Elizabeth Bishop

Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her life was blighted by strife and tragedy from a very young age, starting with the death of her father, William Bishop, who passed away when Elizabeth was just eight months old. This loss had a catastrophic impact on her mother, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, who suffered a series of breakdowns and was permanently institutionalised when Elizabeth was five. Elizabeth would never see her mother again.

Following her mother's hospitalisation, Bishop was initially raised in a loving environment by her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia, until her paternal family brought her back to Worcester, Massachusetts. However, she was deeply unhappy with this turn of events, which she described as a 'kidnapping'. She later stated in a biographical piece: 'I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism ... I felt myself aging, even dying. I was bored and lonely.'

Bishop suffered from poor health from an early stage of life, a situation that resulted in a very fragmented educational experience. However, she attended Vassar

College in the late 1920s, studying music at first, before settling on English. Bishop struggled with low self-esteem and depression throughout her university years, and she drank heavily. She battled ongoing ill health, including chronic asthma, which was far less manageable at the time. It was during this phase that Bishop's poetic talent began to blossom. The great American poet Marianne Moore became her friend and mentor. She took Bishop on as something of a poetic apprentice, and helped her to publish her first poems and stories. Bishop flirted briefly with the idea of pursuing medicine at Cornell, but in the end was dissuaded from this path by Moore.

After finishing her education, Bishop spent a great deal of time travelling. A small inheritance from her deceased father ensured she could satisfy this restlessness without worrying about employment. She spent many years shuttling on a shoestring between France, New York and Key West in Florida. In Florida, in particular, she cultivated an appreciation for fishing, which is reflected in a poem entitled 'The Fish'. However, it was also during these nomadic years that her alcoholism festered.

Some academics have suggested that Bishop's drinking stemmed from a desire to fill the parental void in her life as well as from her feelings of inadequacy. Surprisingly, given her obvious talent, Bishop had little confidence in her own artistic ability, and felt overwhelmed by her equally gifted contemporaries and the edgy New York literati. She binged destructively, and alcohol came to dominate her life, as indicated in the poem 'The Prodigal'. From 1945 to 1951, Bishop's personal life seemed to decline while her literary career took off on what would be a stellar trajectory. In 1946 she released her first collection of poetry, the award-winning *North and South*.

Feeling somewhat creatively and emotionally dissatisfied, Bishop sought to soothe herself with travel, and so, in 1951, she travelled by freight ship to Brazil. She intended to stay for two weeks, but instead settled there for almost two decades, during which time she won a Pulitzer Prize. She maintained a relationship with Lota Soares, a Brazilian woman she had known

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for many years. By all accounts, these were the most contented years of Bishop’s life. Her lack of creative self-belief continued to cripple her, however, and she endured what could only have been excruciating bouts of writer’s block. She sometimes spent months, or even years, attempting to finish a poem. She would write the poem out in big letters on cardboard sheets above her desk, leaving gaps for the perfect words that she struggled to pin down.

Bishop’s final years were difficult. She was devastated by the suicide of her partner, Lota, in 1967. She had returned to the US and landed teaching positions at the University of Washington, Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She also supplemented her income by giving public readings of her work.

Bishop’s literary celebrity increased, and her poetry was recognised with a glut of prestigious awards, including a National Book Award (1970), a Neustadt International Prize (1976) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1978). Despite her success, these sometimes proved to be difficult and lonely years, as she continued to deal with alcoholism and depression. She died suddenly in 1979.

The tragedies that clouded Bishop’s early life never truly left her. They contributed not only to her greatest personal battles but also to some of her most powerful poetry. Echoes of this formative trauma can be found in such poems as ‘Sestina’. Her mother’s absence left its mark and explains the prominence of motherhood or maternity that features in her work.

Although Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, the poet’s mother, is explicitly referenced in only one poem (‘First Death in Nova Scotia’), her life story also provided details for the disturbing short story called ‘In the Village’. In this story, Bishop recalls how, when she was a five-year-old girl, her mother suffered her breakdown. The story provides an immense psychological insight into her life and work.

Bishop developed an enduring friendship with the esteemed poet Robert Lowell, to whom she was introduced in the late 1940s. They corresponded

for years, right up until Lowell’s death in 1977. They influenced one another’s work in equal measure. After Lowell’s death, Bishop remarked upon the warmth of their relationship: ‘Our friendship was kept alive through years of separation only by letters, remained constant and affectionate, and I shall always be deeply grateful for it.’ She wrote the poem ‘North Haven’ in Lowell’s memory.

Bishop famously refused to appear in female-only anthologies, a fact that has been interpreted by some as an unspoken censure of the feminist movement, which gained significant traction in 1960s America – just when Bishop was reaching her literary zenith. However, in a 1978 interview, Bishop explicitly identified herself as a feminist and explained that her aversion to being included in women-only anthologies arose rather from a deeply held conviction that she should be judged purely as a writer, not according to gender.

The time that Bishop spent in Brazil also influenced her poetry. She became fascinated with Brazilian culture and translated many poems and stories from Portuguese into English. Her appreciation of Latin American literature is evident in ‘Questions of Travel’ and ‘The Armadillo’.

While much of Bishop’s personal life was marked with tragedy and personal torments, it was not the focal point of her work. She was not inclined to use writing to complain and was not drawn to the confessional style of her contemporaries, who laid bare many dark and sordid details from their personal lives. Instead,

Bishop devoted her poetry to celebrating and exploring the terrors and beauties of the physical world, as well as the mystery and complexity of the human psyche. Her work seems to concentrate intensely on small details, possibly because she perceived such details to be the only concrete (and, therefore, most important) things in life. She explained this succinctly in one of her many letters to Robert Lowell: ‘My passion for accuracy may strike you as old-maidish – but since we do float on an unknown sea I think we should examine the other floating things that come our way very carefully; who knows what might depend on it?’

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 [5]
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 [10]
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 [15]
the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,

receding, dwindling, solemnly
and steadily forsaking us,
or, in the downdraft from a peak,
suddenly turning dangerous. [20]

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 [25]
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. [30]
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 [35]
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! [40]

[3] **fire balloon:** a balloon that rises when a small fire at its mouth heats and rarefies the air within it

[16] **Southern Cross:** a distinctive constellation visible in the southern hemisphere

[19] **downdraft:** downward current of air

[31] **armadillo:** a mammal with a protective leathery shell and long claws for digging

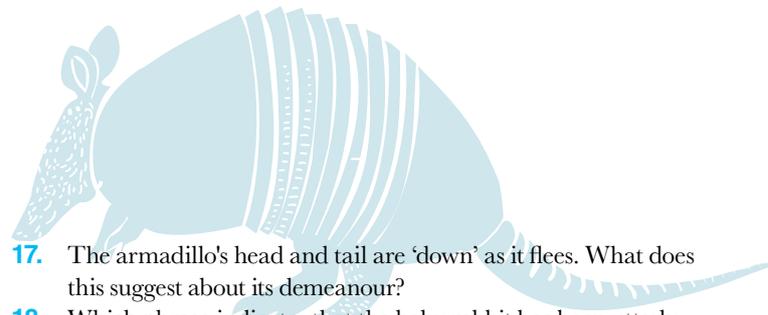
[35] **intangible:** something that cannot be touched; difficult to understand; vague and abstract

Get In Gear

1. In which country is this poem set? You may wish to research Bishop's biography online in order to answer this question.
2. Watch Video 3, which describes how to manufacture sky lanterns or fire balloons. Write a paragraph describing the main steps in this process.
3. The balloons, we're told, go 'rising toward a saint'. This is because they're released to celebrate St John, whose feast-day falls on the 24th of June. Have you heard of any other traditions that are celebrated, or rituals that are performed, around this date in Ireland or another country?

Tease It Out

1. The fire balloons are described as 'frail'. What does this suggest about the materials involved in their construction?
2. The fire balloons have been declared 'illegal'. Can you suggest why they might be banned by the authorities?
3. The balloon's flight-path follows the slope of a nearby mountain. Which phrase suggests this?
4. Class Discussion: The poet describes how light 'comes and goes' within the 'paper chambers' of the balloons as they drift upwards. Can you suggest what phenomenon is responsible for this effect?
5. What simile does the poet use to describe this effect? Is it a successful comparison?
6. True or false: According to the poet, the balloons resemble stars when they are 'up against the sky'.
7. Would you agree that the poet corrects herself when making this comparison?
8. Which four verbs does the poet use to describe the balloons' movement on a windy night? In each case, can you come up with an alternative verb of your own that has a similar meaning?
9. On 'still', windless nights the balloons move 'solemnly'. Working in pairs, consider this adverb and try to come up with three other words that it brings to mind.
10. Consider the phrase 'forsaking us'. Pick two adjectives of your own to describe the emotions felt by the spectators as they watch the balloons drift out of view.
11. The balloons, as they drift ever higher, seem to move among the stars themselves. What metaphor is used to describe this optical effect.
12. What's a 'downdraft'? What impact do such downdrafts have on the fire balloons?
13. Where did the fire balloon touch down on the previous night? What simile does the poet use to describe its impact?
14. What verbs are used to describe the movement of the owls? Would you agree that these verbs convey a sense of panic and confusion?
15. Group Discussion: The owls are described as stained 'bright pink underneath'. What is the cause of this pinkness?
16. What has caused the armadillo to be 'rose-flecked'?



17. The armadillo's head and tail are 'down' as it flees. What does this suggest about its demeanour?
18. Which phrase indicates that the baby rabbit has been utterly incinerated by the flames?
19. The rabbit's remains are described as 'intangible'. What would happen if you touched this rabbit-shaped 'handful of ash'?
20. Group Discussion: Why did Bishop choose to print the final stanza in italics? Do these lines come from the poet's point of view or from some other viewpoint?
21. The final lines refer to a clenched fist that is described as 'mailed', 'weak' and 'ignorant'. Who or what does this fist belong to?
22. Why did Bishop choose to title this poem 'The Armadillo'?

Think About Themes

1. Class Discussion: What do you understand by the expression 'Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry'? What precisely do the fire balloons mimic? Consider the following possibilities and rank them in order of likelihood:
 - They resemble bombs, being launched upwards then crashing back down again.
 - They resemble prayers, drifting upwards towards the heavens.
 - They resemble spacecraft. (Remember that Bishop was writing at the dawn of the space age.)
 - They resemble love poems; after all, they're made out of paper, just like books of poetry.
2. Class Discussion: We can imagine how the sight of hundreds of floating fire balloons might be described as 'pretty' and 'dreamlike'. But in what sense might they be described as 'too pretty'?
3. Bishop is known as a poet with a measured, detached tone. Can you identify three phrases in this poem where this tone comes across?
4. Would you agree that the poem's last four lines are more directly emotional? What emotions, in your opinion, are expressed here?
5. 'Above all else, this poem is about the stupidity of men with regard to their environment'. Write a paragraph agreeing or disagreeing with this statement.
6. 'This poem is about things that are dangerous but that we can't stay away from. Things like war, love and art exude a glamorous attraction despite – or perhaps because of – their danger.' Write a paragraph in response to this statement.

The Armadillo



2

'The Armadillo' is set in Petrópolis, Brazil, where Bishop lived with her partner Lota Soares for many years.

Armadillos are medium-sized animals, about 150 centimetres long, that are native to Brazil and elsewhere in South America. They are distinguished by their long narrow snouts, their short legs and, especially by the leathery armour shell that covers their bodies. This protective covering is composed of overlapping plates that resemble the mail armour worn by medieval warriors. (This is why the armadillo's fist is described as 'mailed').

The feast day of Saint John, which falls on the 24th of June, was marked by a carnival in Rio and in other Brazilian cities. In the weeks leading up to this celebration, the local people would release fire balloons 'almost every night'. The community would gather and watch hundreds, maybe thousands, of these balloons drifting into the night sky: 'This is the time of year when ... the frail, illegal fire balloons appear'.

Bishop describes these fire balloons as 'frail', suggesting their delicate design. Each balloon consisted of a thin paper shell, with an opening at the bottom. At the centre of the shell was placed a 'candle' made from paraffin wax. When the candle was ignited, it heated the air inside the balloon, causing it to rise. Eventually, however, the candle would go out and the balloon would drift to earth again.

Like many fireworks, the balloons were declared 'illegal' by the authorities. This is because fire balloons tended to fall to earth with their candles still smouldering. Sometimes, on impact, the balloon's paper shell would go up in flames. This could lead to wildfires that consumed everything in the crashed balloon's vicinity: wooden houses, crops, cliffs or dried-out scrubland. Bishop even installed a sprinkler system on her own property as a precaution against the destruction that the fire balloons might cause.

But neither the risk of such environmental damage nor the threat of prosecution prevented the local population from indulging in this ritual celebration of Saint John. On most June nights, the fire balloons continued to fill the sky.

The poet clearly appreciates the balloons' mysterious beauty. From time to time, the paraffin in each 'paper chamber' flares, causing the flame to grow bigger and brighter. Then it dies down again. Bishop wonderfully captures this flickering effect, observing that each balloon seems to 'flush and fill with light/ that comes and goes'.

We can imagine that such a vast flotilla of flickering spheres would indeed make a sight to remember. We can imagine hundreds, or even thousands of balloons drifting upwards, each one flickering on and off according to its own irregular rhythm.

The poet watches the balloons floating into the night sky:

- The balloons float upwards at an angle, their flight-path tracking the slope of the mountain: 'Climbing the mountain height'.
- A statue of Saint John, the saint that the fire balloons were designed to honour, sits on the mountain peak. The balloon float upwards toward his likeness: 'rising toward a saint/ still honored in these parts'.
- The balloons keep rising – higher than the statue, higher than the mountain peak – until they are 'up against the sky'.
- On a 'still' night, the balloons rise 'steadily', drifting upwards in an even fashion, untroubled by any winds. According to the poet, there is something 'solemn' about their movement. We can imagine how the sight of hundreds, or even thousands, of such balloons drifting slowly upwards might strike us not only as dignified and ceremonial but also as awe-inspiring and majestic.
- On such a windless night, the balloons rise so high that they seem to merge with the great mass of stars overhead. Bishop uses a wonderful metaphor to capture this optical effect, telling us that the balloons seem to 'steer between' the constellations.
- Finally, the balloons disappear from view altogether. They keep 'receding' or moving away. Their light keeps 'dwindling', becoming fainter and fainter as they rise so high that they are no longer visible.
- The poet tells us that observers on the ground feel forsaken by the fire balloons as they float out of sight. The observers feel dejected and abandoned now that they can no longer see the fire balloons' grace and beauty.

3

On windy nights however, the movement of the balloons is not so graceful. Gusts of air cause them to stall or ‘falter’ in their gentle upward movement. They ‘wobble’ awkwardly in the breeze. Their movement becomes erratic and unpredictable, as they are tossed around by the wind. They ‘flare and falter, wobble and toss’.

Sometimes, the balloons are caught by a ‘downdraft’, a sudden current of air gusting down the mountain-side. Such gusts can carry the balloons dangerously close to people and to buildings: ‘in the downdraft from a peak,/ suddenly turning dangerous’.

The previous night, a large fire balloon crashed into the ground behind the poet’s property: ‘Last night another big one fell’. The poet tells us that this balloon ‘splattered like an egg of fire against the cliff behind the house’. And we can indeed visualise the spherical balloon as a kind of egg, but one that spills fire, rather than yolk and egg-white, on impact with the ground.

The poet observes how the crashed balloon set fire to the vegetation on the cliff side, causing great destruction. The flames consumed an ‘ancient’ nest where ‘a pair of owls’ had resided for years or even decades. The poet watched as these terrified birds fled the conflagration, flying ‘up and up’ into the night sky.

The owls, it seems, were on fire as they fled. The poet, in a brilliant descriptive touch, describes the flames as a pink stain on their ‘black-and-white’ feathers. She describes how they went ‘whirling’ through the sky: ‘whirling black-and-white/ stained bright pink underneath’. We can imagine them wheeling about in confusion, but also, no doubt, striving to quench the flames that were consuming them. Finally, they disappeared from view, ‘shrieking’ in pain and terror as they did so.

The poet observes a rabbit leaping from the burning vegetation on the cliff-side: ‘And then a baby rabbit jumped out’. It stared directly ahead in a ‘fixed’ fashion, as rabbits often do when in a

panicked state. We can imagine that it was almost hypnotised by the inferno that suddenly surrounded it.

This ‘baby’ rabbit, it seems, was absolutely tiny, so small that it might fit in the palm of one’s hand. The poet watched as it was consumed by the flames. She watched as it was reduced, before her very eyes, to a tiny a rabbit-shaped heap of ashes. This pile of ash is described as ‘intangible’, because if it was touched, it would crumble, losing its rabbit shape: ‘So soft! – a handful of intangible ash’.

A single armadillo also attempted to flee the chaos. Its leathery armoured shell was ‘rose-flecked’ from the flames. It is unclear whether the armadillo is actually on fire or whether its shell is simply speckled with little pieces of burning material. Its head and tail are described as being ‘down’, as if it were cowering in fear in a desperate attempt to protect itself.

4

A notable feature of the poem is the fact that the final stanza is printed in italics. This is because the poet is speaking for the armadillo, attempting to articulate this poor animal’s reaction to the human carelessness that has destroyed its home.

- She expresses the armadillo’s feelings of terror and incomprehension as it flees this chaotic scene where flame has suddenly started ‘falling’ from the sky, a scene filled with panicking animals and their ear-splitting cries: ‘O falling fire and piercing cry and panic’.
- She expresses the armadillo’s anger at the destruction visited upon its habitat when she condemns the fire balloons for their ‘Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!’
- She observes how the armadillo raises its clenched fist against the sky, in a traditional gesture of anger and defiance. It’s as if the armadillo is cursing or condemning the fire balloons and their creators.

The creature’s rage is futile, however. It is too ‘ignorant’ to understand the destruction that has occurred and too weak to repair the damage or exact revenge.

THEMES

TRAVEL AND EXILE

The speaker presents herself as something of an outsider in the Brazilian community in which she lives. Her position as an immigrant, or a long-term visitor, rather than a native inhabitant, is one that really comes across throughout the poem.

The phrase ‘in these parts’, for instance, suggests that this is a community the poet is still attempting to make sense of, rather than one in which she feels completely at home. It is significant that she takes no part in the ritual of the fire balloons that so engages the local population. Perhaps, as a visitor from a richer, more advanced country, she regards such rituals and beliefs as primitive and backward.

To the poet, then, the fire balloons are a strange local custom, one that is not only quaint and beautiful but also senseless and

dangerous. She acknowledges the beauty of the fire balloons as they drift smoothly into the distance, but condemns the damage they all too often cause when they fall earthwards.

A LOVE AND RESPECT FOR THE NATURAL WORLD

In ‘The Armadillo’, as in so many of her poems, we get a sense of Bishop as someone with a keen awareness of her environment, someone who notices the birds, animals and other wildlife that surround her. She’s aware for instance that there’s an ‘ancient nest’ at the back of her property where a ‘pair of owls’ have nested. She even notices, in the middle of the chaotic inferno caused by the crashed balloon, that the baby rabbit is of the ‘short-eared’ South American variety.

‘The Armadillo’, then, can be read as an environmentalist poem, as a lament for mankind’s careless indifference to nature.