

Beyond Lowell: Elizabeth Bishop's “The Armadillo”, Fire Balloons, and the Threat to a Home in Brazil

Elizabeth Neely

Doutoranda em Literatura pela University of North Texas, EUA, com doutorado sanduíche na Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, como bolsista Fulbright.
e-mail: enczest@yahoo.com

Resumo: Por meio de sua dedicatória, “O Tatu” é o único poema brasileiro de Elizabeth Bishop ligado ao poeta estadunidense Robert Lowell, amigo seu. A correspondência entre Bishop e Lowell publicada no *Words in Air* (2008) revela que, a princípio, Bishop não dedicara o poema a Lowell. “Finalmente decidi colocar seu nome sob o poema Tatu, pois você tinha gostado dele,” escreveu ela em 1965, oito anos após a publicação do poema. Os críticos têm, todavia, relacionado o poema à posição contrária de Lowell em relação aos bombardeios das tropas aliadas na Alemanha. Defendo que a especificidade e o feriado de São João, pano de fundo do ícone cultural dos balões de fogo, e a perturbação provocada pelos balões no ambiente e na vida doméstica das duas mulheres que moram em Samambaia, tornam este um poema profundamente enraizado no Brasil mais do que em qualquer influência externa.

Palavras-chave: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, balões, tatu, Samambaia

Abstract: Through its dedication, “The Armadillo” is Elizabeth Bishop’s only Brasil poem linked to fellow American poet, Robert Lowell. Correspondence between Bishop and Lowell published in *Words in Air* (2008) reveals that Bishop initially did *not* dedicate the poem to Lowell: “I finally decided to put your name under the Armadillo poem, since you have liked it,” she writes in 1965, eight years after the poem was first published. Yet critics have linked the poem to Lowell’s conscientious objector stance when Allied troops dropped bombs in Germany. I argue that the specificity and timing of the Brazilian holiday of São João, the background of the cultural icon of the fire balloons, and the fire balloons’ disruption of the environment and the domestic life of the pair of women who live in Samambaia make it a poem rooted more deeply in Brasil than in any outside influence.

Key Words: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, fire balloons, armadillo, Samambaia

“The Armadillo,” published in the *New Yorker* on June 22, 1957, has been one of Bishop’s most anthologized poems and, through its dedication, is her only Brasil poem linked to Robert Lowell. It inspired his own “Skunk

Hour” and earned Lowell’s great commendation. He comments to Bishop in a letter dated April 28, 1960, “I carry ‘The Armadillo’ in my billfold and occasionally amaze people with it” (Bishop and Lowell, 2008, p. 324). However, many critics overlook the fact that Bishop initially did *not* dedicate the poem to Lowell, and thus he may not have directly inspired the poem when she penned it. In a letter Bishop sent to Lowell on August 2, 1965, eight years after “The Armadillo” was published, she writes:

I don’t think I told you—but I *finally* decided to put your name under the Armadillo poem, since you have liked it. I have a longer, grimmer one, about Copacabana beach, too, that is to be dedicated to you—but I didn’t get it done in time and I did want to mention you somehow or other in this book. Well when it appears, it may be a bit better than ‘The Armadillo.’” (Bishop and Lowell, 2008, p. 582, italics mine)

Bishop’s unpublished “Apartment in Leme,” which she refers to here, remains virtually unknown, although it is a rich and promising draft. Her letter shows her concern about attaching Lowell’s name to one poem as she assembles her upcoming volume, *Questions of Travel*, also published in 1965 like this letter. Bishop decides to dedicate “The Armadillo” to Lowell for the simple reason that he admired it, not because she singles out the poem as connected to Lowell for personal reasons. She probably would have been amazed to see that “The Armadillo” has become one of her most well-known poems and to witness the ways in which Lowell’s background and beliefs have become attached to it.

Granted, Lowell was Bishop’s most consistent correspondent and confidante during her Brasil years, in particular. Their conversational letters are generally regular, and when one seems to take a leave of absence, the other writes persistently until there is an answer. They span Bishop’s pre-arrival in Brasil in 1951 (she writes him from her freighter) until she finally leaves what became her temporary home in Ouro Preto in 1970 and begins teaching at Harvard. In fact, their letters during Bishop’s roughly seventeen Brasil years fill 549 of the 798 pages of *Words in Air*, or almost 69% of their complete correspondence.

Critics have linked Lowell and his personal anti-war views to “The Armadillo” even though none of the Bishop-Lowell correspondence mentions it. Penelope Luran’s critical essay, “‘Old Correspondences’: Prosodic Transformations in Elizabeth Bishop,” written during Bishop’s year of death in 1979, seems to have begun the association:

. . . Bishop dedicated [“The Armadillo”] to Robert Lowell, who became a conscientious objector when the Allied command began fire-bombing German cities. Bishop’s poem points directly to these fire bombings, which wreaked the same kind of horrifying destruction on a part of our universe that the fire balloons wreak on the animals. In the last quatrain, the “mailed fist,” besides being a familiar figure of speech for threats of war-making, represents the protective “armor” of a soldier which is suggested by the armadillo’s carapace (1983, p. 81).

As a result of her analysis, the fire balloons have become synonymous with the fire bombings in Europe for other critics and readers, a fact which has prevented exploration of the balloons as a uniquely Brazilian phenomenon. Even those not wholly persuaded by Lauran's analysis have referred to her position in their writing; for instance, in Lorrie Goldensohn's analysis of Lowell's "Skunk Hour" alongside "The Armadillo," she summarizes Lauran's position as "see[ing] the dedication of the poem as a sympathetic response to Lowell's pacifist objections to the Dresden fire-bombing" (1992, p. 188).

If one reads the poem as a piece of work Bishop wrote specifically for Lowell, one can indeed equate the fire balloons with bombs, and Lowell, a conscientious objector, with the armadillo. In a letter to Bishop on October 28, 1965, after naming "The Armadillo" as one of Bishop's "absolutely top poems" Lowell comments, "I see the bomb in it in a delicate way" (Bishop and Lowell, 2008, p. 591). "Delicate" seems an odd choice of adjective for Lowell to pair with "bomb," if bomb here is to be taken in the context of the violent bombs dropped on Europe. Perhaps he is reiterating Bishop's depiction of fire balloons as both fragile and threatening. But what is the context for his observation? Lowell is ticking off a list of his favorite poems in Bishop's newly published *Questions of Travel* (1965) and is including brief details and commendations about each poem. After this sentence he moves on to the merits of "The Riverman." His mention of "the bomb" may not at all equate with the European fire bombings but rather something else in his own mind upon which he never expands. If Lowell did, in fact, inspire this poem, one might see the fire balloon in an additional context: its inflated beauty and subsequent crash may reflect his personality augmented and overshadowed by his bipolar illness. Five years after the publication of "The Armadillo," Lowell and his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, visited Bishop in Brasil. During their stay, Bishop witnessed Lowell suffering one of his high episodes, and he was eventually hospitalized in the U.S.

On the other hand, if Lowell did *not* actually inspire the poem—and the correspondence between Bishop and Lowell strongly supports this possibility—it needs to be examined through other lenses. I suggest that the specificity and timing of the Brazilian holiday of São João, the background of the cultural icon of the fire balloons, and the fire balloons' disruption of both the environment and the domestic life of the pair of women who live in Samambaia make it a poem that is rooted more deeply in Brasil and in Bishop's domestic circumstances there than in any outside influence.

In the rush to construct the poetic dialogue between Bishop's "The Armadillo" and Lowell's "Skunk Hour," some critics forget to consider what specifically makes "The Armadillo" a Brasil poem: the time of year when the action unfolds during the "Festa de São João" (or "Junina"), the cultural phenomenon of the "frail" but "dangerous" fire balloons, and the background of the particular saint "still honored in these parts," all of which Bishop refers to in the initial six lines of the poem:

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 (BISHOP, 1979, 103).

The “mountain height” is part of Samambaia; thus, “The Armadillo” continues the same natural setting as “Squatter’s Children,” “Manuelzinho,” and “The Shampoo,” but now this environment, including the home that she shared with her Brazilian companion, Carlota de Macedo Soares (best known as “Lota”), is under a literal and metaphorical threat. The “we” that observes this threat (the pronoun appears only once in the sixth stanza) is the same pair as the dear friends in “The Shampoo.” This makes it reasonable to wonder if the displacement of the animals out of their nests and lairs illustrates the speaker’s real or imagined fear about threats to the domestic environment of Samambaia.

The fire balloons identify the holiday as the “Festa de São João” (Feast of St. John) which falls on June 24 and marks the birth of John the Baptist. Since according to the Gospels, John was born six months before Jesus, the June holiday is also known as “Junina” (June Festival), and it coincides with the winter solstice. Thus the “saint / still honored in these parts” is not an exotic or unknown Brazilian, but rather St. John, known the world over. The celebration was originally introduced by the Portuguese during the colonial period in Europe and was brought to Brasil where it mixed with native and Afro-Brazilian customs (Mariuzzo, 2010, par. 8–9). The festivities in Brasil, the largest in the world, focus on rural life and often feature people dancing to country music in folk costumes. Because the holiday coincides with the corn harvest, dishes such as *pamonha*, a mixture of corn, sugar, and coconut milk, accompany the festival. On the evening of June 23, Catholics in Brasil, as in many other countries, light bonfires. “The frail, illegal fire balloons,” or *balões*, are aerial extensions of these fires.

However, embedded in these opening stanzas and their references to the Festa de São João is a more personal note from Bishop. She focuses on the light inside the balloons “that comes and goes, like hearts,” taking the reader back to the domestic setting of the poem. Maria Clara Pereira, former English Professor at the Universidade Católica de Petrópolis, sees this line as making the poem lyric as well as narrative, and in her reading the balloons or hearts indicate a “love that suddenly turns dangerous and abandons or destroys” (personal communication). As readers we expect to see “fire” associated with the balloons, but not necessarily the “flush and fill” of light that suggests either a heart beating or the heart in stages of waxing or waning passion. From the beginning of the poem then, Bishop hints at the physical danger of the fire balloons but also the metaphorical danger of inconsistent love.

Bishop reveals the structure of her poem very carefully, moving from the general background of the fire balloons to the specific balloon that falls on her property. She spends four-and-a-half stanzas describing the fire balloons in an aesthetic, generally benign way, then illustrates the crash of a balloon for a stanza-and-a-half in the middle of the poem, and spends the last four stanzas showing the effects of the crash

on the animals in the environment. She polarizes her diction between fragility on one hand ("frail," "comes and goes," "falter," "wobble," "toss," "receding," "dwindling," "forsaking") and danger on the other ("illegal," "flush and fill," "flare," "dangerous," "egg of fire," "splattered," "flame"). Her coupling of "frail" and "illegal" in the third line hints at their danger even though she keeps her language in check until the moment of impact. The *abab* rhyme scheme, which begins definitively, becomes muted as Bishop chooses more and more slant rhymes as the poem progresses.

The wind is the catalyst for unbalancing the fire balloon and is the agent of its fall. It first enters in the fourth stanza in a hypothetical situation where it can cause the balloons to "flare and falter, wobble and toss," and in another hypothetical situation in the fifth stanza where "the downdraft from a peak / suddenly [turns it] dangerous." By the sixth stanza a balloon has fallen "against the cliff behind the house," presumably from such a downdraft, but this is not the first time: it is "another big one." The "we" that follows has witnessed this event before, but now they are witnesses of a destruction of greater magnitude.

The popular Brazilian folksong, "*Cai Cai Balão*" ("Fall, Fall, Balloon"), borrowed by composers such as Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959), whose music Bishop heard in concert during her early Brasil years, is still sung by Brazilian children today:

Cai cai balão, cai cai balão
Aqui na minha mão,
Não vou lá, não vou lá, não vou lá
Tenho medo de apanhar
 Fall, fall balloon, fall, fall balloon
 Here in my hand,
 I won't go there, I won't go there, I won't go there
 I'm afraid to catch it.

The child in the song fears catching the balloon not only because of the fire danger itself, but also because of the potential punishment he or she might receive from parents for doing so. "Apanhar" can mean to seize or grab, but also to get a beating. Built into the song is the kind of paradox that appears in Bishop's poem: the magnetic attraction to the beautiful illuminated object floating in space and the simultaneous repulsion from it because of its inherent danger.

In Brazilian literature the balloons take on nostalgia as children send the self-crafted paper vessels up to the sky. One way to understand the nature of the fire balloons is through the poem "*Na Rua do Sabão*," ("On Soap Street") by Manuel de Bandeira (1886–1968), the first Brazilian poet with whom Bishop spent time in the early 1950s. While much of her early reading in Portuguese was dedicated to the Portuguese poet, Camões, whose sonnets she revered and recommended, it is likely that she also read Bandeira's work, including this poem originally written in the 1930s. He begins with three lines from the folksong:

Cai cai balão
Cai cai balão

Na Rua do Sabão!
O que custou arranjar aquele balãozinho de papel!
Quem fez foi a filha da lavadeira.
Um que trabalha na composição do jornal e tosse muito.
Comprou o papel de seda, cortou-o com amor, compôs os gomos oblongos . . .
Depois ajustou o morrão de pez ao bocal de arame.
Ei-lo agora que sobe —pequena coisa tocante na escuridão do céu.
Levou tempo para criar fôlego.
Bambeava, tremia todo e mudava de cor. . .

Fall, fall balloon
Fall, fall balloon
On Soap Street!
What it cost to arrange that little paper balloon!
The washerwoman's son made it,
The one who works at the newspaper typesetter and coughs a lot.
He bought tissue paper, cut it with love, joined the elongated sections,
then attached the tarred wick to the wire mouthpiece.
Look at it now as it climbs—a little thing moving in the sky's darkness.
It took time to get its wind.
It vacillated, trembled, and changed color. . . (SLATER, 1989, p. 62, translation changes mine)

Bishop's balloons that "flare and falter, wobble and toss" in the presence of wind reflect the fragility of the fire balloon and its maker in *Bandeira's* poem. Later *Bandeira's* balloon survives slingshot attacks by street urchins and a man's warning that the city's ordinance prohibits fire balloons. The balloons are illegal here, just as in Bishop's poem, although it wasn't until 1998 that a New Environmental Crime Law prohibited not only the release fire balloons, but also making, selling, or transporting them. A rhyming advertising campaign by the police accompanied the law in 2008: "*Soltar balões não é legal, É crime ambiental*" or "Releasing balloons is not legal; it's a crime that's environmental" (OLIVETTI, 2008, par. 1). This includes a play on words: "legal" also means "cool". *Bandeira's* illegal fire balloon is not apprehended by the police nor is it caught in "the downdraft from a peak." Rather it climbs "*muito serenamente,*" very serenely to the sea. *Bandeira's* poem shows the beauty of the balloon that cannot be detained, and an unspoken and invisible link to the child who made it—possibly *Manuelzinho's* children in the case of Bishop's balloon.

After the fall of the fire balloon in "*The Armadillo,*" the witnesses, presumably Bishop and Lota, observe how its flames physically mark each animal that leaves the environment it invades. The owls' "whirling black-and-white" is "stained bright pink underneath," the armadillo becomes "rose-flecked" with either sparks of fire or blood, and the baby rabbit jumps out "*short-eared,*" appearing as "a handful of intangible ash / with fixed, ignited eyes," either reflecting the fire, filling with metaphorical fire, or literally catching on fire. All these creatures become transformed in the eyes of the viewers.

But the burst balloon also forces animals out of their homes. A pair of owls is

the first to leave. In fact, if Bishop had not included the last stanza with the armadillo's raised fist, the image of the owls and the loss of their nest would become central. Implied is the pair of women watching the pair of owls leaving the scene. In fact, Bishop focused on the owls in her draft process. She entitled the poem "The Owls' Nests" in her first two drafts; "The Armadillo" appears only on the third draft after she crosses out "The Owls' Nests." The drafts also show a progression from the owls simply "circling out of sight" to the more urgent, "they shrieked up out of sight." The loss of the owls' nest due to the fire is clearly traumatic; Bishop emphasizes this by the repetition of "nest," first as a verb in the seventh stanza ("We saw the pair / of owls who nest there . . ."), and then as a noun in the eighth ("The ancient owls' nest must have burned"). Domestic threat is central here; there is something disquieting and precarious about how quickly an environment can be undone.

The animals' enforced homelessness—the armadillo who "left the scene," the baby rabbit who "jumped out," and especially the owls who are forced from their nest and "shrieked up out of sight"—may reflect Bishop's latent fears of losing her own home and newfound domestic stability in her relationship with Lota. Bishop is six years into her Brasil stay at this point, long enough for the honeymoon to be over and for her to be wondering about her future. The destruction of the owl pairs' nest threatens the domesticity of the human pair watching them (the "we" who "saw the pair of owls . . . flying up and up"), even in the seemingly pristine location of Samambaia, the home that Bishop and Lota worked so hard to establish, including the separate writing studio Lota had designed for Bishop. Lota had even installed a sprinkler system on the roof, specifically for these Junina celebrations (Bishop to Baumann, 24 June 1955, Vassar College). A poem that has been read too easily as a biographical commentary on the absent Lowell has much to say about the situation of the present speaker.

Bishop shows this same concern about safety and the fragility of human relationships in another domestic poem set in Samambaia, "Song for the Rainy Season." There the luxuriant natural setting including the "rainbow-ridden" rock, its waterfalls, and wildlife (including the owls once again) will all "differ" in a projected later era. Then the rock will be bare, the waterfalls will "shriveled in the steady sun," and the owls will move on. Whether the disruption to domestic setting is real in the case of "The Armadillo" or imagined in the case of "Song for the Rainy Season," Bishop seems to have an uncanny knack for predicting a difficult future even in the midst of a harmonious present. Yet for a poet perpetually searching for a home, anticipation of disruption is an underlying current, even during these fifteen-plus years of settled living in Brasil, the longest period of domestic stability that Bishop ever experienced.

The parting image of "The Armadillo" features not the pair of owls but the armadillo, the only animal who receives a second look by the speaker and who uses a human gesture in response to the disaster, even if by ignorant "coincidence." What is this Brazilian armadillo, or *tatu*? Armadillos in Brazil now, and presumably in the 1950s, come in two varieties: the Brazilian Three-banded Armadillo and the Southern Three-banded Armadillo. Their form of protection is to roll into a completely sealed armored ball when threatened, a posture that northern armadillos (such as nine-banded armadillos in Texas) try to imitate, but cannot successfully pull off, contrary to popular myth (Stuart, 1993, p. 36). The fact that Bishop's armadillo defies its customary

response to danger and instead shakes its fist makes it remarkable, whether or not the gesture really occurred—although Bishop herself championed accuracy in her poems. She displaces any signs of moral outrage over the fire balloons' damage onto an animal affected by it; this incidental gesture speaks more loudly than human words.

In setting the real or imaginary fist aside for a moment, the armadillo appears as a humble survivor. It leaves the scene “[h]astily, all alone . . . head down, tail down,” its body close to the earth. Pereira calls the armadillo a “humble loser” and asks, “Is that what Bishop feels herself to be?” (personal correspondence). It is an interesting question when one considers Bishop’s departure from her later home in Ouro Preto in the years after she lost Lota to suicide. Certainly the armadillo’s shell and its ability to curl into a ball to protect itself suggest an independent self-protection that Bishop was able to achieve at some points during her life.

The final stanza accomplishes much more than an armadillo shaking his fist; it encapsulates the whole poem at once in concentrated impact:

*Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
O falling fire and piercing cry
And panic, and a weak mailed fist
Clenched ignorant against the sky!*

Here the italics indicate that this quatrain is different than the others. They might in themselves be a tool to create the “dreamlike mimicry,” indicating how the fire balloons mimic a beauty that hides their danger, or, as Stevenson reads the stanza, how the fire balloons illegitimately imitate the stars and planets described in the third and fourth stanzas (2006, p. 81). Perhaps these lines relate to the last two italicized quatrains of “Questions of Travel.” As Goldensohn observes, “Like the italicized lines in “Questions of Travel” which show Bishop briefly experimenting with the same summary function, these lines reach for a broader, more comprehensive significance” (1992, p. 190). She links this “comprehensive significance” to what she perceives as shared weaknesses among the “head-down panicked armadillo and the baby rabbit. . . Manuelzinho, and the ‘weak flashes of inquiry’ of the squatter’s children” (1992, p. 190). However, while these poems, all composed at Samambaia around the time, should be linked, connecting them through perceived weaknesses oversimplifies the more sophisticated ways in which Bishop approaches her Brazilian subjects. While these subjects could be viewed superficially as victims of their environment, each finds ways to assert itself. The armadillo leaves the scene in a posture that defies the instinct of its species. Its head may be down and its retreat may be hasty, but rather than a panicked victim, it is a survivor in search of a new home. Manuelzinho, who may first seem “weak” in the eyes of his patron, uses his wits to gain her backing to support his immediate family and sponsor his father’s funeral. His children—the squatter’s children—defy their mother’s repeated requests to come in out of the rain and instead enjoy nature’s gift of the moment, with a hint of a possible inheritance beyond the moment. In Brasil Bishop does not just observe, she shows how her subjects orchestrate their survival while she negotiates the peaks and valleys of her own survival.

We should take a parting look at the matter of Bishop's dedication of "The Armadillo." During the international centennial Bishop conference of 2011, "Deslumbrante Dialética: O Brasil no Olhar de Elizabeth Bishop" ("Dazzling Dialectics: Brazil in the Eyes of Elizabeth Bishop") Bishop scholar and editor, Lloyd Schwartz, shared an anecdote about a Bishop reading he attended before he had actually met the poet. In the fall of 1970 she returned to Boston from Brasil to give a poetry reading at Harvard. During the reading she said that she wanted to clarify a mistake that had happened in the past and that she had personally picked "The Armadillo" to read in order to rectify it. She then said that she had added the dedication to Lowell because he had dedicated "Skunk Hour" to her and she wanted to return the favor. The poem itself had nothing to do with him. Despite her public clarification, dedication myths have ironically persisted through the years. New ways of seeing works like "The Armadillo" as a result of the relatively new phenomenon of American and Brazilian Bishop researchers convening will challenge and ultimately change some of the interpretive assumptions that have long been taken for granted in Bishop's Brasil-based poetry.

Works Cited

- BISHOP, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems 1927–1979*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.
- BISHOP, Elizabeth and Robert Lowell. *Words in Air*. Ed. Thomas Travisano. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
- GOLDENSOHN, Lorrie. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- LAURENS, Penelope. "'Old Correspondences': Prosodic Transformations in Elizabeth Bishop". Ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983. 75–95.
- MARIUZZO, Patrícia. *A história das festas juninas no Brasil e no mundo*. Governo do Estado São Paulo, 15 July 2010. Web. 10 Aug. 2011.
- OLIVETTI, Cris. "Polícia Ambiental realiza campanha 'Soltar Balão não é Legal, é Crime Ambiental'". Governo do Estado de São Paulo. Secretaria do Meio Ambiente, 26 May 2008. Web. 28 Aug. 2011.
- PEREIRA, Maria Clara. "The Armadillo". Message to Elizabeth Neely. 16 Dec. 2011. e-mail.
- SLATER, Candace, Ed. *This Earth, That Sky: Poems by Manuel Bandeira*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- STEVENSON, Anne. *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop*. Northumberland, U.K.: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2006.
- STUART, Dee. *The Astonishing Armadillo*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, Inc., 1993.