

C. K. Doreski: On "The Armadillo"

. . . the firelit landscape of "The Armadillo" offers no sanctuary for the beleaguered creatures. The poem offers a glimpse of a secularized religious celebration, long since stripped of intent and meaning; the "frail, illegal fire balloons" ascend toward a waiting saint. In ascendancy, the fire floats assume lives of their own:

the paper chambers flush and fill with light that comes and goes, like hearts.

Unstable and undirected, these heaven-bound balloons, gestures of "love," bear the potential of either love or war:

Once up against the sky it's hard to tell them from the stars? planets, that is? the tinted ones: Venus going down, or Mars . . .

Oscillating between the heavenly extremes, the "tributes" represent a kind of chaos, not order; terror, not relief and penance. Bishop suggests that their very uncertainty? "With a wind, / they flare and falter, wobble and toss"? aggravates earthly insecurities. Inappropriate celebrations, which are both blasphemous and ignorant, violate the sacredness of ritual and disrupt the relationship between culture and nature. Such violation is likely to provoke fate and turn "dangerous":

[lines 15-20]

The final line plummets toward the grim consequence of a moment of particularized sensation? an actual event, not merely a condition. Yet Bishop turns this tale of fragile faith and false tribute not on the plight of humanity but of innocent creatures. As messily careless in descent as ascent, the fire balloon "splatter[s] like an egg of fire," immolating airborne and ground-dwelling inhabitants alike. The scene commands full attention as the fire egg ironically brings death to the owl's nest:

[lines 24-28]

The appearance of the visibly immature ("short-eared") baby rabbit captures the instantaneous transition of the setting:

So soft!? a handful of intangible ash with fixed ignited eyes.

Even as the poem reaches for the airy substance of the hare it disintegrates into the

elements, returning the speaker's gaze with the steadfast certainty of death. An epiphany would reach for comfort and assurance, for insight and explanations through a glimpse of a dimension in which suffering doesn't occur. The lyric hero, however, responds only to ignorance and fear. In the italicized exclamation of the closure, the poet challenges even the aesthetic posture of poetry; she cries out as one forever earthbound:

[lines 27-40]

The harsh deformations reject all falsification and softening of reality. Invocation and resignation collapse together in an impotent outcry as rage displaces epiphany. Unable to transcend the horror of this awesome occurrence, yet unwilling to return into the experience of the poem, Bishop gestures angrily but agnostically toward the beyond, challenging the type and substance of the incomprehensible. Bishop, like Wordsworth, sees humanity's dilemma as one of estrangement from natural vision; but unlike her predecessor, she has neither the ability nor the will to penetrate the otherworld and confirm herself in epiphany, further distancing herself from such harsh realities. She can neither accuse nor ignore her own kind; she can only grieve.

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