Elizabeth Bishop – Summaries and Quotes

Poems

* The Fish
* The Prodigal
* Sestina
* First Death in Nova Scotia
* Filling Station
* In the Waiting Room

**The Fish**

Summary

* Bishop catches a fish and examines him in almost forensic detail
* She notes evidence of his resilience and previous triumphs
* Deciding that the fish deserves to live, she lets him go
* Her ability to describe the minute details of both his appearance and her boat is the most notable aspect of this poem
* Based on a real experience

Quotes

* I caught a tremendous fish
* He didn’t fight / He hadn’t fought at all
* His brown skin hung in strips like ancient wallpaper
* Grim, wet, and weaponlike
* Five big hooks grown firmly in his mouth
* Like medals with their ribbons frayed and wavering
* A five-haired beard of wisdom
* Until everything was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
* And I let the fish go.

**The Prodigal**

Summary

* Title derives from the story of the Prodigal Son, a man who turns his back on his family (but demands his inheritance first), falls into ruin, but is welcomed back with open arms
* Bishop drew on her own past of destructive drinking
* Set in a pig sty that is described in revolting detail
* Form: double sonnet
* Strong sense of isolation, self-loathing, and difficulty in taking the decision to go home (an option that really wasn’t there for Bishop)

Quotes

* Brown enormous odor
* The sow that always ate her young
* (he hid the pints behind a two-by-four)
* And then he thought he almost might endure / his exile yet another year or more.
* But it took him a long time / finally to make his mind up to go home

**Sestina**

Summary

* Written in very challenging sestina form (six unrhymed stanzas of six lines and a seventh stanza of three lines, called the envoy. Only six words are used to end lines. Last word in each stanza recurs as ending of first line in the next. The envoy uses all six words)
* Paints a picture of a house visited by tragedy
* Grandmother and grandchild seem to be coping with some great sorrow
* Ominous presence of the almanac adds a dark element

Quotes

* Reading the jokes from the almanac / laughing and talking to hide her tears
* tears …foretold by the almanac
* the teakettles small black tears / dance like mad on the hot black stove
* Birdlike, the almanac / hovers half open above the child
* teacup full of dark brown tears
* *I know what I know,* says the almanac
* *rigid house*
* man with buttons like tears
* *Time to plant tears*, says the almanac
* inscrutable house

**First Death in Nova Scotia**

Summary

* Tackles a child’s attempt to come to terms with the death of a peer
* Other experiences of death are compared (the loon)
* Child tries to create a more pleasing narrative, but doesn’t fully believe it

Quotes

* In the cold, cold parlour
* a stuffed loon / shot and stuffed by Uncle / Arthur, Arthur’s father
* his eyes were red glass, / much to be desired
* Arthur’s coffin was / a little frosted cake
* He was all white, like a doll / that hadn’t been painted yet
* (the royal couple) They invited Arthur to be / the smallest page at court
* But how could Arthur go, / clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up to tight / and the roads deep in snow?

**Filling Station**

Summary

* Descriptive poem that paints a vivid picture of a particular petrol station, and the family life behind it
* Bishop sees beyond the grease and dirt to recognise the loving, domestic background

Quotes

* Oh, but it is dirty!
* oil-soaked, oil-permeated / to a disturbing, over-all / black translucency
* several quick and saucy / and greasy sons assist him
* Some comic books provide / the only note of color - /of a certain color
* Why the extraneous plant? / Why the taboret? / Why, oh why, the doily?
* Somebody embroidered the doily
* Somebody /arranges the rows of cans /so that they softly say: /ESSO-so-so-so / to high-strung automobiles.
* Somebody loves us all

**In the Waiting Room**

Summary

* Deals with issues of identity and Bishop’s burgeoning sense of her individuality and the form that individuality would take
* In particular, she becomes aware of her female identity
* The experience is extremely disconcerting and she finds it hard to regain equilibrium

Quotes

* The waiting room / was full of grown-up people
* (I could read)
* Babies with pointed heads / wound round and round with string
* Their breasts were horrifying
* I was too shy to stop
* even then I knew she was / a foolish, timid woman
* What took me / completely by surprise / was that it was me
* Without thinking at all / I was my foolish aunt
* the sensation of falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space
* But I felt: you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*, / you are one of *them*
* I knew that nothing stranger / had ever happened, that nothing / stranger could ever happen
* The waiting room was bright / and too hot. It was sliding / beneath a big black wave, / another and another