

The Mountain

Elizabeth Bishop

“At evening, something behind me.
I start for a second, I blench,”

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VOCABULARY

Blench — sudden flinch, fear or pain, alternative meaning is to grow pale

Impenetrable — cannot penetrate it, go beneath

Demarcation — mark something out, fix the boundary or limits (dividing line), can be figurative

Clambering — clumsily climbing

Sifted — putting it through a sieve, the grains become fine and even

STORY / SUMMARY

Stanza 1: In the evening, the narrative voice (potentially the mountain) notices something behind them. They stop for a moment and flinch, shudder and burn, process of growth in a mountain. It doesn't know its age.

Stanza 2: The morning is different. In daylight, the mountain can see its surroundings, but cannot necessarily decipher them. It asks its age.

Stanza 3: An indefinite amount of time passes and the valleys impede the mountain with mist that block the senses, specifically hearing. It doesn't know its age.

Stanza 4: It doesn't want to complain. It is said that the mountain is at fault. It does not get told anything. It asks its age.

Stanza 5: The human made boundaries in the mountain change over time for mountains are not stationary things, the movement likened to a tattoo. It does not know its age.

Stanza 6: Night falls and day rises, the passing of time. The mountain gives birth to stumbling souls on their travels, but likened to childhood it is transient in comparison to the eternity of the mountain. It asks its age.

Stanza 7: The mountain witnesses countless deaths; the wings of a bird turn from a petrified state to refined grain (back to the earth). The claws are lost and the animal can no longer fend for itself. The mountain still doesn't know its age.

SPEAKER / VOICE

The mountain is given a voice to speak about its observations of the world, but also its personal feelings and concerns. It observes the life and death of ephemeral entities — the shifting boundaries of human borders, the death and decay of birds. It is particularly preoccupied with the unknown aspect of ageing, and also the access to knowledge around it that cannot be understood — a **metaphor** for our limited capacity to understand the world from a **subjective viewpoint**.

FORM/STRUCTURE

- **7 quatrains**, fairly even / regular.
- **Alternating conclusions to each stanza**; repeated statement and repeated imperative run throughout the poem. This creates a regular rhythm between passive and active, with a **rocking rhythm**.
- These recurring lines are **monosyllabic** with **basic vocabulary**; in contrast the poetic voice of the mountain seems to articulate itself well throughout, however here it is diminished to a childish state with its lack of knowledge.
- Feels like a **broken villanelle** (a form which Bishop liked) but **without the conclusion of a harmonising couplet**, unresolved — some lines repeat but in a more fragmented way than a standard villanelle.
- There is **no set rhyme scheme**.

- **Enjambment** and end stopped lines are both used: many of the stanzas begin with a sense of fluidity and end abruptly. It seems to symbolise the growth of mountains, shuddering quickly due to the tectonic plates — emulating the natural rhythm of nature.
- Only one **caesura** in the opening line of the penultimate stanza — this contrasts the monotonous sense of infinity that the line suggests and draws attention to it. **Antithetical line**, demonstrates the contrast of night and day.

THEMES

- **Eternity vs Ephemerality** — From the perspective of the mountain, humans and their activities are very ephemeral, and the lives of animals pass very quickly — although from our perspective mountains seem eternal, the mountain is preoccupied with its own age, which suggests an anxiety about death or the ageing process.
- **Childhood** — This is a transient state — the mountain watches its children or some children — young entities — growing up, becoming independent and leaving — to the mountain this process happens too quickly — reflects the idea of families, children growing up, ageing is more evident in children than adults as their physical and mental development is rapid — the older something is, the slower its process of change.
- **Age / The Ageing process** — Death, ageing and time are all relative — perhaps the worry the mountain has about not knowing its age is more concerning its expiry date than the time its lived, or loss of beauty or youth as humans would be concerned by — ageing is also seen as the process by which matter shifts from inert to active — soil or rock to life — and back again via the imagery of the deconstructed bird,

- **Death** — The mountain harbours a questioning anxiety about death, but more specifically about when its demise will come. Despite the misconstrued idea that mountains are immortal, there is an acknowledgement that everything has to die in order for others to be born, relating to the concept of matter being finite.
- **Boundaries** — Between human + nature, imposed by humans, between day + night, old + young. The poem seems to undermine the definition of boundaries; they seem frivolous to nature as the human constraints do not apply.
- **Observation** — The mountain observes the life of its surroundings, the birth and deaths are an emblem of the transience of ephemerality. It cannot ultimately interfere in the lives of the youth that will follow the same path of every other living specimen.
- **Activity / Passivity** — Despite the mountain being seemingly passive through this observative stance, it shudders and burns, an allusion to the growth of mountains by tectonic plate movements. This is reflected in the alternating final lines of each stanza, from passivity to activity (statement to imperative) concerning the wondering of its age.
- **Time** — The concept of time is relative to the amount one is given; the mountain does not know how much time it has lived and thus even when it can see its environs, it cannot demystify its blurred concept of time.
- **Loneliness** — The mountain lives in solitude, being outside of the time that animals and humans follow. Even when its surroundings are revealed, it still cannot relate to the outside world, creating a feeling of loneliness.