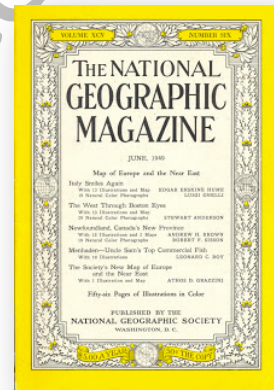


In The Waiting Room – Elizabeth Bishop

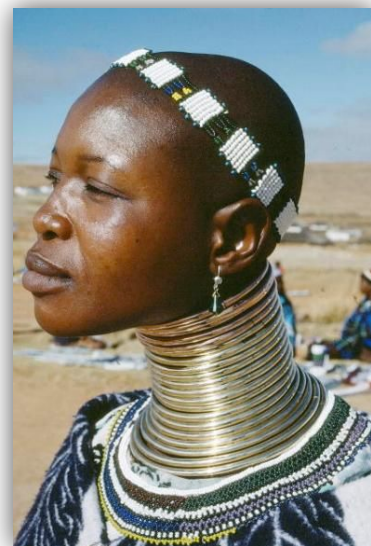
In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room
was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.
My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited I read
the National Geographic
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
--"Long Pig," the caption said.



Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.
And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I--we--were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,
February, 1918.



CREATING THE ARISTOCRATIC POINTED HEAD
Early in life the young Mangbetu patrician must submit to the tightly wound fiber cords which force his skull into the elongated shape dictated by tradition. The process is not a comfortable one. Children undergoing this long ordeal will draw back uneasily if one attempts to touch their heads. Occasionally they even cry, and a crying baby is scarcely ever heard in the Congo.



I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.

I was saying it to stop
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.

Why should you be one, too?

I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.

I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.

I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?

What similarities--

boots, hands, the family voice

I felt in my throat, or even

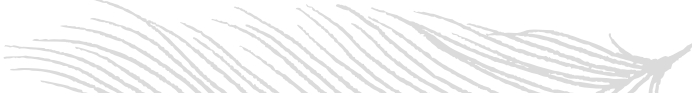


the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How--I didn't know any
word for it--how "unlikely" . . .
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.





“The poem presents a young girl's moment of awakening to the separations and the bonds among human beings, to the forces that shape individual identity through the interrelated recognitions of community and isolation.”

Lee Edelman from "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room.'" *Contemporary Literature* 26.2 (Summer 1985): 179-196.

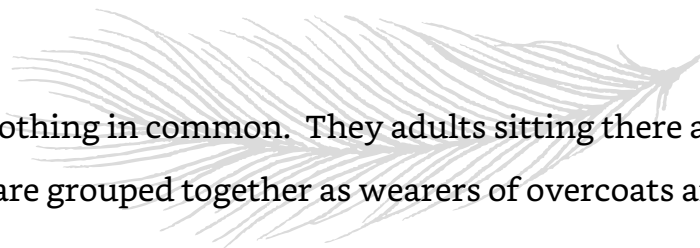
Title:

To be in a waiting room is to be in a state of transition. What awaits us on the other side of the door may be positive or negative. The fact that this poem is set in a dentist's waiting room does seem to suggest that what lies ahead is discomfort at best and pain at worst. This is reinforced by Aunt Consuela (Bishop's Aunt Florence in real life) letting out a cry of pain, albeit a short one.

The young child in the poem (a six year-old Elizabeth Bishop, is about to enter a stage of her life where she leaves the rather self-absorbed innocence of childhood behind and sets tentative foot in the more adult world. It is not a world with which she identifies in the least, yet, but she has an epiphany while in the waiting room which leads her to see for the first time her place in the world and the various futures that await her. Is there an inevitable path she must follow or has she any control over her own destiny? The poem contains a number of profound, philosophical questions as Bishop wrestles with this issue.

Summary and analysis:

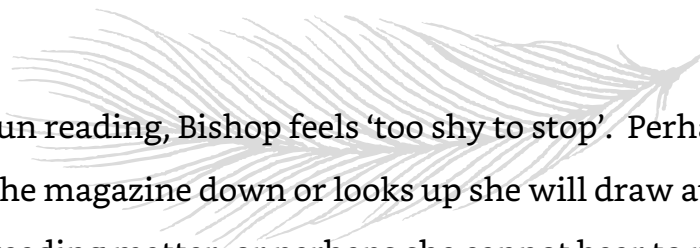
The poem opens with simple statements of fact telling us the time and place in which the events in the poem took place. The language is matter-of-fact and practical, as befits a six-year old child. The scene is one of normality and childhood boredom: the young girl is stuck in a room full of 'grown-ups' with



whom she has nothing in common. The adults sitting there are not seen as individuals but are grouped together as wearers of overcoats and galoshes.

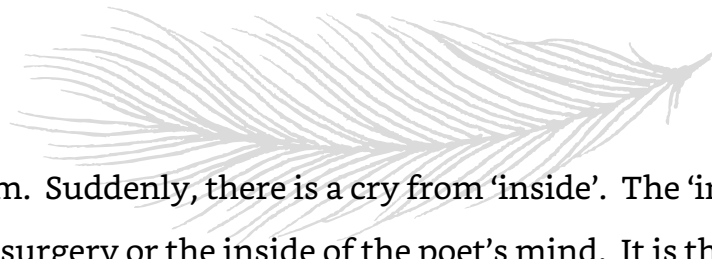
Bishop's aunt is in the dentist's surgery and the poet passes the time by reading the National Geographic. The accurate recollection of a child's view of the world is captured in the comment on the length of time Aunt Consuela seems to be taking in the surgery and also in the girl's pride in her ability to read even though she is only six.

The pictures and articles in the magazine depict a world that seems a million miles from the mundane dentist's waiting room in Massachusetts. The first image is of a volcano erupting and this immediately introduces a note of danger. The outside world can be a threatening, violent place. Next, the little girl looks at a photo of the African explorers Osa and Martin Johnson in their strange attire of pith helmets and riding breeches. A picture of a dead man slung on a pole with the caption 'Long Pig' underneath suggests that the corpse is to be cannibalised. This is a deeply disturbing image, although it is not clear whether or not the young poet would have known that 'long pig' refers to the similarity between human flesh and pork. Either way, the dead man being carried so ignominiously would be bound to unsettle a child. The images which follow are equally grotesque and full of implied pain and cruelty inflicted on people by members of their own race. In certain parts of the Congo, babies' heads were wound with string to artificially elongate the growing skull. In other parts of Africa, women placed metal rings around their necks – adding to the number all the time – in order to stretch their necks in a way considered beautiful by those around them. The result appals the young poet, as do the photos of topless African women with 'awful hanging breasts'. There is a strange compulsion in the images nonetheless and now



that she has begun reading, Bishop feels ‘too shy to stop’. Perhaps she feels that if she puts the magazine down or looks up she will draw attention to herself and her reading matter, or perhaps she cannot bear to meet the eyes of those in the waiting room lest they know what she is reading. When she has read through to the end, Bishop focuses on the familiar and unthreatening cover of the National Geographic and its bright yellow margins. There is a sense in which the margins put a neat frame around the contents of the magazine and somehow make them more controlled and less threatening. Similarly, the date on the cover is a concrete and inoffensive focal point. It roots the poet in the present and brings her back to the dull but normal surroundings of the dentist’s waiting room.

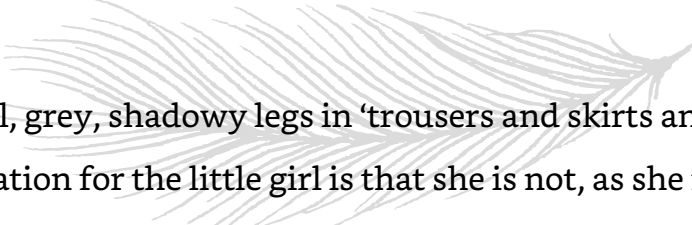
At this stage in the analysis of the poem, it is worth noting that despite the detailed descriptions of the February 1918 issue of the National Geographic, the facts we are presented with are not quite true. Certainly, Bishop visited the dentist with her aunt – it is mentioned elsewhere – but the February 1918 issue of the magazine did not show pictures of African women or babies. When Bishop was questioned about this in an interview, she claimed to have mixed up the February and March editions of the National Geographic. However, the March edition also does not contain any images of African women or babies. The critic Lee Edelman claims that the very attempt to pin down the literal truth of the stories of the oppression of women and children is a part of the very mindset that causes such oppression in the first place. Edelman says that by trying to prove the factual truth of the young Bishop’s memories we are guilty of trying to put female cries of pain in their place. His argument is that anyone who does so is ignoring the fundamental truth in what Bishop is saying and is seeking refuge in literal truth rather than facing the uncomfortable facts.



Back to the poem. Suddenly, there is a cry from 'inside'. The 'inside' here could be the dentist's surgery or the inside of the poet's mind. It is the sound of Aunt Consuela's voice as she makes an exclamation of pain. With the characteristic harshness of the young, Bishop notes that Aunt Consuela is 'a foolish, timid woman' who could be expected to make such a noise. The noise she makes does not surprise Bishop but what does take her completely by surprise is the realisation that the voice could be hers as easily as Aunt Consueala's. At this moment, Bishop identifies with Aunt Conseula and recognises the similarities between them. Might she grow up to be just like her aunt? Or is the cry 'oh!' the young poet's anguish on reading the magazine and seeing the lengths to which people – particularly women - have to go and the pain they are forced to suffer in order to fit in with societal norms? Again, it has been argued that it is irrelevant to obsess over the origin of the 'oh!' as it is the voice of all of those who have been forced into constraint – literal and metaphorical.

The young Bishop is overwhelmed by a sudden realisation that she is part of the human race and not separate from it, as she might have believed up to now. The horrifying pictures of women in the National Geographic are not that different from what she will become when she is older. The grown-ups she dismissed as hardly worthy of a second glance are, like her, human beings. Will she be like them when she grows up? The girl feels like she may faint and is clings to hard facts such as the cover of the National Geographic and her upcoming birthday to stop herself becoming lost in the overwhelming rush of emotion.

There is a note of defiance in the poem when the young poet asks herself *why* she should be 'one of them'. She steals a shy glance at the adults around her



but only sees dull, grey, shadowy legs in 'trousers and skirts and boots'. The important realisation for the little girl is that she is not, as she may have thought, unique. She is like her family, like the adults in the waiting room and even like the rather terrifying figures in the magazine. She wonders about the similarities between herself and others and asks how it is that she happens to be in the waiting room in Massachusetts while in other parts of the world people are suffering strange and unnecessary mutilations. There is no attempt to answer these questions and the feeling of faintness rises up again. The waiting room seems too hot and everything around her begins to turn dark. Suddenly, the shock subsides and the poet feels normality returning. Just as the poem began with details about the time and place, so it ends with a restating of those facts. The only difference, and it is a significant one, is that the First World War is included in the description. It is a reminder that even though the poet is in a place that may appear dull and unthreatening, war is raging elsewhere in the world. The outside world is a dangerous place and now the poet knows that she cannot remain apart from it forever.