

## 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 and 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.

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.