In the Waiting Room

Elizabeth Bishop 1911 - 1979

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.

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.

Sunday Morning

Wallace Stevens, 1879 - 1955

I

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late

Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,

And the green freedom of a cockatoo

Upon a rug mingle to dissipate

The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

She dreams a little, and she feels the dark

Encroachment of that old catastrophe,

As a calm darkens among water-lights.

The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

II

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued

Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

III

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.
No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave
Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind
He moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

IV
She says, “I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?”
There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven’s hill, that has endured
As April’s green endures; or will endure
Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
By the consummation of the swallow’s wings.

V
She says, “But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss.”
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires. Although she strews the leaves
Of sure obliteration on our paths,
The path sick sorrow took, the many paths
Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love
Whispered a little out of tenderness,
She makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

VI
Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
Why set the pear upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
The silken weavings of our afternoons,
And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

VII
Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source.
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
That choir among themselves long afterward.
They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
Of men that perish and of summer morn.
And whence they came and whither they shall go

The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

VIII

She hears, upon that water without sound,

A voice that cries, “The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.

It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.”

We live in an old chaos of the sun,

Or old dependency of day and night,

Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,

Of that wide water, inescapable.

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail

Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;

Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;

And, in the isolation of the sky,

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make

Ambiguous undulations as they sink,

Downward to darkness, on extended wings.
Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares(2) we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest(3) began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots(4)  
Of tired, outstripped(5) Five-Nines(6) that dropped behind.  
Gas!(7) Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets(8) just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime(9) . . .  
Dim, through the misty panes(10) and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.  
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering,(11) choking, drowning.  
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud(12)  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest(13)  
To children ardent(14) for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est  
Pro patria mori.(15)

Wilfred Owen  
Thought to have been written between 8 October 1917 and March, 1918