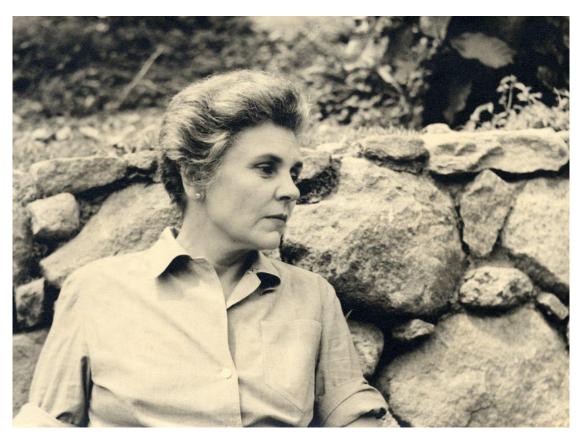
"In the Waiting Room"

by Elizabeth Bishop (1911 - 1979)



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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 /, 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 -- 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.