Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room"

Transcription:

Elizabeth Bishop, "In the Waiting Room" Elizabeth Bishop in her maturity, like her contemporary Gwendolyn Brooks, was remarkably open to what younger poets were doing. In the case of Brooks, the political ferment of the Civil Rights movement shaped the Black Arts poets who began writing in its midst and in its aftermath, and in turn the young Black Arts poets had a great impact on the mature Brooks. Her line became looser, her focus became more political. Brooks, along with Robert Hayden (you will encounter both of these poets in succeeding chapters) was the pre-eminent black poet in mid-twentieth century America. Yet when younger poets breathed a new air, product of the climate changed by the public struggle for civil and human rights in America, Brooks was brave enough to breathe that new air as well. Many of these young poets wrote powerful and moving poems but none, save Leroi Jones, aka Imamu Baraka, had her poetic ability. No matter. She was open to change, willing to embrace new values, new practices, new subjects. So with Brooks contemporary, Elizabeth Bishop. In her maturity a new wind was sweeping poetic America. Among black poets it was black consciousness. Among mainstream white poets, it was less political, more personal. We call this new poetry, in a term no poet has ever liked or accepted, confessional poetry. Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsberg, W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and most importantly Robert Lowell started mining their past in order to harness new and explosive powers. The revelation of personal pain, pain that they like their readers had hidden deeply within their psyches, shaped the work of these poets,. The power and insight (and voyeuristic excitement) that would result if we could overhear what someone said about a childhood trauma as she lay on a psychiatrist's couch, or if we could listen in on a penitent confessing to his sins before a priest in the darkened anonymity of a confessional booth: this power and insight drove their poems. Bishop s In the Waiting Room was influenced, I think, by these confessional poets, perhaps most especially by her friend Robert Lowell. But this poem, though rooted in the poet s painful childhood, derives its power not from confession but from the astonishing capacity children have to understand things that most of us think is in the adult domain. Although the poem is about hurt, it is primarily about a moment of deep understanding, an understanding that leads to the hurt. Bishop's respect for human

existence, her respect for the child we once were, is breathtaking. Even though I have read this poem many times, I am always amazed by what it has to tell me and what it has to teach me about what being human entails. 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. 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. When I sent out Elizabeth Bishop's The Sandpiper, I promised to send another of her poems. The Sandpiper is a poem of close observation of the natural world; in the process of observing, Bishop learns something deep about herself. In the Waiting Room is a poem of memory, in

which by closely observing what would seem to be just an incident in her childhood, Bishop recognizes a moment of profound transformation. It is, I acknowledge at the outset, one of my favorite poems of the twentieth century. Let me begin by referring to one of my favorite poems of the prior century, the nineteenth: the immensely long, often confusing, and yet extraordinarily revealing The Prelude, in which William Wordsworth documented the growth of his self. Five or six times in that epic poem Wordsworth presents the reader with memories which, like the one Bishop recounts here, seem mere incidents, but which he nevertheless finds connected to the very core of his identity 1. 1 Several occur at the beginning of the long poem, one or two in the middle, two near the end, and one at the conclusion. Most of them are very, very hard to understand: that is, the incidents are clearly described, yet why they should be so remarkably important to the poet is immensely difficult to comprehend. I should know: I've spent

Here's what Wordsworth has to say about the two memories he recounts near the end of the poem. There are in our existence spots of time, That with distinct pre-eminence retain A renovating virtue, whence depressed By false opinion and contentious thought, Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight, In trivial occupations, and the round Of ordinary intercourse our minds Are nourished and invisibly repaired; A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced, That penetrates, enables us to mount, When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen. Spots of time, so much more specific than what we call 'memories,' are for Wordsworth precise images of past events that he retains, and these spots of time renovate 2 his mind when they are called up into consciousness. Why, how, do these spots of time renovate, especially since most of the memories are connected to dread, fear, confusion or thwarted hope? Even though he states that the spots of time nourish and repair a mind that is depressed or mired in routine, there is something mysterious in the process of repairing: I cannot fully explain how a terrifying or depressing memory can nourish and repair us, just as I cannot fully explain Bishop's experience in the poem before us. Though I will try to explain as best I can. After long thought, sometimes seemingly endless, I have reached the conclusion that for Wordsworth, the spots of time renovate because they are essential truly essential to his identity: they root him in what he most authentically deeply, truly, is. This perception that a vibrant memory is profoundly connected to identity is, I believe, a necessary insight for understanding Bishop's In the Waiting Room. more than half a lifetime pondering why these memories, why they're important, how they shaped the poet Wordsworth was to become. 2 In earlier versions, 'fructify' was the verb--to make fruitful. 'Renovate,' from the Latin, means quite literally, to renew. In between these versions, he used 'vivify' --to make alive. All three verbs are strong, though I confess I prefer the earliest version, since it seems, well, more fruitful. Stronger.

For I think Bishop's poem is about what Wordsworth so felicitously called a spot of time. Her spot of time, one chronologically explicit (she even gives the date) and particular in precisely what she observed and the order of her observing, is composed of a very simple well, seemingly simple experience, one that many of you will have experienced. Three things, closely allied, make up the experience. A dentist's office. Pain, which even more recent innovations like Novocain, nitrous oxide, and high speed drills do not fully eliminate. Magazines in the waiting room, and in particular that regular stalwart, the National Geographic magazine. That's it. That's the skeleton of what she remembers in this poem. The first eleven lines could be a newspaper story: who/what/where/when: 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 It should not surprise us that the people have arctics and overcoats: it is winter and this is before central heating was the norm. The lamps are on because it is late in the day. And there are magazines, as much a staple of a dentist s waiting room as the dental chair is of the dentist s office. The speaker of the poem reads a National Geographic. She's proud of herself I could read which is a clue to what we will learn later quite specifically, that she is three days shy of her seventh birthday. I suppose the world has changed in certain ways, from 1918 when Bishop was a child to the early 1970's when she wrote the poem Yet in both eras copies of the National Geographic were staples of doctors' and dentists' offices. (Now it may more likely be Sports Illustrated and People). National Geographic, with its yellow bordered covers and its photographic essays on the distant places of the globe, was omnipresent in medical and dental waiting rooms.

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: Nothing hard here, nothing that seems exceptional. What we learn from these lines, aside from her reading the magazine, is that the narrator's aunt is in the dentist s office while her young niece is looking at the photographs. I might as well state now what will be obvious later in the poem: the narrator is Bishop, and she is observing this 'spot of time' from her almost-seven year old childhood 3. I have never taught the writing of poetry (I teach the history of poetry and how to read poems) but if I did, I might perhaps (acknowledging here the ineptness that would make me a lousy teacher of writing poems) tell a student who handed in a draft of the first third of this poem something like this. Wait a minute. I like the detail, because poems thrive on specific details, but aren't these lines about the various photographs a little much: looking at pictures, and then 15 lines of kind of extraneous details? Cut, cut, cut! But Elizabeth Bishop is a much better poet than I can envision or teach. In these fifteen lines (which I will rush past, now, since the poem is too long to linger on every line) she gives us

an image of the innerness spilling out, the fire that Whitman called in Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking the sweet hell within, though here it is a volcano, not so much sweet as potentially destructive. After the volcano come two famous explorers of Africa, looking very grown up and distant in their pith helmets, encountering cannibals (Long Pig is human flesh). I, she writes, studied the photographs: the inside of a volcano, black, and full of ashes; then it was spilling over in rivulets of fire. 3 Published in her last book, Geography Ill in the mid-1970's, the poem evidences the poetic currents of the time, those of 'confessional poetry,' in which poets erased many of the distances between the self and the self-in-thework. This is very unlike, and in rebellion against, the modernist tradition of T. S. Eliot whose early twentieth century poems are filled with not just ironic distance but characters who are seemingly very different from the poet himself, so that Eliot's autobiographical sources are mediated through almost unrecognizable fictionalized stand-ins for himself, characters like J. Alfred Prufrock and the Tiresias who narrates the elliptical The Waste Land.)

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. I myself must have read the same National Geographic: well, maybe not the exact same issue, but a very similar one, since the editors seemed to recycle or at least revisit these images every year or so, images of African natives with necks elongated by the wire around them. So foreign, so distant, that they were (she suggests) made into objects, their necks like the necks of light bulbs. Anyone who as a child encountered National Geographic remembers the most profound images were not, after all, turquoise Caribbean seas, or tropical fruits in the south of India, or polar bears in an icy wilderness, or even wire-bound necks the almost naked women and the almost naked men. Genitals were not allowed in the magazine. But breasts, pendulous older breasts and taut young breasts, were to young readers and probably older ones too, glimpses into the forbidden: spectacularly memorable, titillating, erotic. National Geographic purveyed eros, or maybe more properly it was lasciviousness, in the guise of exploring our planet in the role of our surrogate, the photographically inquiring citizen of the world. Their breasts were horrifying. For Bishop, though, it is not lust here, nor eros, but horror. What, why? We are here, I would suggest, at the crux of the poem. Well, not the only crux, but the first one. 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.

The cover, with its yellow borders, with its reassuringly specific date, is an anchor for the young Bishop, who as we shall shortly observe, has become totally unmoored. We must not forget that she is in the dentist's waiting room, for in the next line the

poet reminds us of her external situation: 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. Not a shriek, but a small cry, not very loud or long. Probably a result of the drill, or the pain of the cavity being explored with a stainless steel probe. No surprise to the young girl. Even at the age seven she knows her aunt is foolish and frightened, emitting her quiet cry because she cannot keep her pain to herself. Aunt Consuelo is, we understand, so often at the edge of foolishness that her young niece has learned not to be embarrassed by her actions. Let me intrude here and say that the act of reading is a complex process that takes place in time, one sentence following another. In my view, what happens in this section of the poem is miraculous. We read the lines above in one way, just as the almost seven year old girl experiences them. But we have to re-evaluate our understanding of the seemingly simple fact the poem has proposed to us. As we read each line, following the awareness of the young Elizabeth as she recounts her memory of sitting in the waiting room, we will have to re-evaluate what she has just heard, and heard with such certainty, just as she did as a child almost a hundred years ago. For it was not her aunt who cried out. The mature poet, recounting at this spot of time, describes the second crux of the child's experience: What took me completely by surprise was that it was me: my voice, in my mouth.

That oh! of pain comes from an entirely different inside: not inside the dentist's office, but inside the young girl. It is her cry of pain: Without thinking at all I was my foolish aunt The recognitions are coming fast, and will come faster. She is the one who feels the pain, without even recognizing it, although she does recognize it moments it later when she comprehends that that oh! was hers 4. Her oh! Her pain. By the end of the long stanza, the young girl is engulfed by vertigo, falling, falling, and is trying to hang on. She returns for a second time to her point of stability, the yellow margins, the date, although this time by citing the title and the actual date of the issue she indicates just how desperately she is trying to hang on to the here-and-now in the face of that horrible falling, falling: I we were falling, falling, our eyes glued to the cover of the National Geographic, February, 1918. That falling in these lines? Great poems can sometimes move by so fast and so flexibly that we miss what should be cues and clues and places where the surface cracks and we would if we were only sharp enough see forces that are driving the poem from beneath 5 Remember those pictures of: Babies with pointed heads wound round and round with string; black, naked women with necks wound round and round with wire [emphases added] which we considered earlier? That is an awful lot of round in four lines, since the word is repeated four times. That roundness returns here in a different form as a kind of dizziness that accompanies our going round and round and round; it also 4 We'll return later to I was my foolish aunt, when the line quite stunningly returns. 5 One of my favorite words of counsel comes from Roland Barthes, a French

critic/theorist who wrote, Those who refuse to reread are doomed to reread the same text endlessly.

carries hints of the round planet on which we all live, every one of us, from the figures in the photographs in the magazine to the young girl in 1918 to us reading the poem today. The poem pauses, if only momentarily: there is, after all, a stanza break. The narrator of the poem, after that break, continues to insist that she is rooted in time, although now it is personal time having to do with her age and birthday instead of the calendar time represented by the date on the magazine. Despite the invocation of this different kind of time, the new insistence on time is a similar attempt to fight against vertigo, against falling, falling, against the sensation of falling off/ the round, turning world. 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. Although the poem, as we saw, begins conventionally with the time, place, and circumstances of the spot of time that Bishop recounts, although it veers into description of the dental waiting room and the pictures the child sees in a magazine, although it documents a cry of pain, we have moved very far and very quickly from the outer reality of the dentist s waiting room to inner reality. And in this inner world, we must ask ourselves, for we are compelled by both that sudden cry of pain and the vertigo which follows it: What is going on? Why does the young Elizabeth feel pain as she sits in a waiting room while her aunt has an appointment with the dentist? Why is she so unmoored? Why must she insist on the date, and insist again on the date, and insist on asserting her own actual identity by naming herself and affirming that she is an individual and possesses a unique self? What wonderful lines occur here But I felt: you are an I, you are an Elizabeth in bold assertion. But the assertion is immediately undermined: you are one of them. Why should you be one, too?

She is a member of an alien species, an otherness, for what else are we to make of the italicized them as it replaces the I and the individuated self that has its own name, that is marked out from everyone else by being called Elizabeth? Who, we may and should, ask ourselves are these them she refers to in her seven-year-old inner dialogue? The answers pour in on us, as we realize that the them are, first and foremost, those creatures with breasts. Women. She is one of them, those strange, distant, shocking beings who have breasts or, in her case, will one day have breasts 6. The young Elizabeth in the poem, who names herself and insists that she is an individuated I, has in the midst of the two illuminations that have presented themselves to her -- the photograph in the magazine that showed women with breasts, and the cry of pain that she suddenly recognizes came from herself understood that she (like Pearl) will be a woman in the world, and that she will grow up amid human joy and sorrow. Without my fully noting it earlier, since I thought it would be best

to point it out at this juncture, we slid by that strange merging of Elizabeth and her aunt - an aunt who is timid, who is foolish, who is a woman - all three: my voice, in my mouth. Without thinking at all I was my foolish aunt, I we were falling, falling, Our eyes glued... [emphases added] If her aunt is timid and foolish, so too is the young Elizabeth, and so too the older Elizabeth will be as well. In this poem, at the remarkably young age of six verging on seven, this remarkable insight is driven into Bishop s consciousness. Part of what is so stupendous to me in this poem is that the phrase you are one of them is so rich and overdetermined. For Bishop comes to realize that she is a woman in the world, and will continue to be one. That she will have breasts, 6 A great literary child-woman forebear looms in the background, I think, of this poem. In the penultimate chapter of Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, the Hester Prynne's young daughter embraces her dying father. Let's look at how Hawthorne describes Pearl at this moment: The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. [I've added the emphases.]

and not just her prepubescent nipples. She also comes to realize that she can feel pain, and will continue to feel pain. She realizes that there is a continuity between her and savages: that the volcano of desire, the strangeness of culture, the death and cruelty that she encountered in the pages of National Geographic characterize not Africa alone, but her own American world 7 and her existence. Osa and Martin Johnson, those grown-ups she encountered in the magazine's pages in riding breeches and boots and pith helmets, are all around: not just her timid foolish aunt, but the adults who occupy the space the in the waiting room alongside her. 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. Let me stress the source of the recognition, for to my mind there is a profoundly important perspective on human life that underlies this poem, one that many of us are not really prepared to acknowledge. This is not Wordsworth or a species of Wordsworth s spiritual granddaughter we are dealing with here. Wordsworth recognized the source and dimension and signal strength of his spots of time only many years later, when what he experienced as a child was subjected to meditation and the power of the imagination. His experiences are transformed through memory, the imagination reassessing and reinterpreting them 8. This poem is about Elizabeth Bishop three days short of her seventh birthday. The stream of recognitions we are encountering in the poem are not the adult poet's: The child, Elizabeth, six-plus years old, has this stream of recognitions. If the child experiences the world as strange and unsettling in this poem, so do we, for very few

among us believe that children have such profound views into the nature of things. Our culture believes in growing up, in 7 The poem will end with a reference to World War One. 8 He famously asserted in the Preface to the second edition of his Lyrical Ballads that poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility, a felt experience which the imagination reconstructs. The adult, in Wordsworth s case, re-imagines and mediates the child s experiences. Not so here.

development, in the growth of our powers of understanding, in an increase of wisdom over time. This poem tells us something very different. When Bishop as a child understands, that nothing stranger/ had ever happened, that nothing/ stranger could ever happen, Bishop the fully mature poet knows that the child's vision is true. Wordsworth wrote in lines that are often cited, The child is father of the man. Here, in this poem, we see the child is the adult, is as fully cognizant as the woman will ever be. Wordsworth helped our entire culture recognize the importance of childhood in shaping who we are and who we become. Bishop has another recognition: that we see into the heart of things not just as adults, but as children. Maybe more powerfully, and with greater clarity, when we are children than when we are adults 9. In the poem the almost-seven-year-old Elizabeth, in her brief time in the dentist's waiting room, leaves childhood behind and recognizes that she is connected to the adult world, not in some vague and dreamy when I grow up fantasy but as someone who has encountered pain, who has recognized her limitations through a sense of her own foolishness and timidity, who lives in an uncertain world characterized by her own fear of falling. And, most importantly, she knows she is a woman, and that this knowledge is absolutely central to her having become an adult. Let us return to those lines when Bishop writes of her younger self: I knew that nothing stranger had ever happened, that nothing stranger could ever happen 9 If you are intrigued by this poem, you might want to also read Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia. " In that poem an even younger child tries to understand death. Not possible for the child. For us, well, death seems to have some shape and form. But, following the logic of this poem, might the very young child possibly be wiser than those of us who think we have understanding? John Crowe Ransom, in his greatest poem, "Janet Waking," also writes about a young child who cannot comprehend death. But his poem is from outside: he observes the young girl, "And would not be instructed in how deep/was the forgetful kingdom of death." Wordsworth, in his eerily strange early poem "We Are Seven," pursues a similar theme: children do not understand death. The difference between Wordsworth and Ransom, one the one hand, and Bishop on the other, is that she does not observe from outside but speaks from within the child's consciousness. Wordsworth does allow, I readily acknowledge, the young girl in his poem to speak in her own voice.

These lines have, to my mind, the ring of absolute truth. Growing up in this poem is otherwise than we usually regard it, not something that occurs when we move from school into the world or become a parent or get a job. Growing up is that moment, vastly strange, when we recognize that we are human and connected to all other humans. In this poem the young Elizabeth is connected to both savages and to the faceless adults in a dentist's waiting room. She comprehends that we will not escape the character traits and oddities of our relatives and that we will be defined by gender and limited by mortality. She realizes that we will forever have to encounter pain and live in a world where the peril of falling into the abyss is immediately before us. In an imitation of the Native American rituals of passage that extend back into the prehistory of the North American continent, this poem limns the initiation of the poet into adulthood. She is stunned, staggered, shocked and close to unbelieving: 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? That question itself is another oh! of pain. The boots and hands, we know, belong to the adults in the dentist's waiting room, where she is sitting, the National Geographic on her lap. The family voice is that of her foolish, timid aunt and everyone in her family (including a father who died before she was a year old and a mother institutionalized for insanity). She can't look at the people in the waiting room, these adults: partly because she has uttered that quiet oh! of pain, partly because she is embarrassed and horrified by the breasts that had been openly displayed in the pages on her lap, partly because the adults are of the same human race that includes cannibals, explorers, exotic primitives, naked people. The adults are part of a human race that the child had felt separate from and protected against until these past moments. No wonder I scarcely dared to look/to see what it was I was. She really can't look: I gave a sidelong glance I couldn't look any higher, and so she sees only shadowy knees and clothing and different sets of hands.

She has, until this hour, been a child, a young Elizabeth, proud of being able to read, a pupa in the cocoon of childhood. But now, suddenly, selfhood is something different. It means being timid and foolish like her aunt. It also means recognizing that adulthood is not far off but is right before her: What similarities -- boots, hands, the family voice I felt in my throat It means being a woman, inescapably, ineradicably: or even the National Geographic and those awful hanging breasts It means being like other human beings, and perhaps not so special or unique or protected after all: held us all together or made us all just one? To be human is to be part of the human race. It is very, very, strange and uncanny. 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? I love those last two lines, in which two things happen simultaneously. The older Bishop who is writing this poem is at this moment one with her younger self. Both acknowledge that pain happens to

us and within us. These lines recognize that pain is the necessary milieu in which we come to full awareness, that not only adults but children or not only children but adults necessarily experience pain, not just physical pain but the pain of consciousness and of self-consciousness. Yet at the same time, pain is something that we learn to bear, for the cry of pain... could have/ got loud and worse, but hadn't. What similarities boots, hands, the family voices 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 10? [emphases added] Bishop does not have an answer to the question the young girl poses: What "held us together or made us all one?" Disorientation and loss of identity overwhelm her once more: The waiting room was bright and too hot. It was sliding beneath a big black wave, another, and another. The young narrator is trapped in the bright and hot waiting room, and it is a sign of her disorientation that we recall that in actuality the room is darkening, that lamps and not bright overhead lighting provide the illumination, and that the adults around have arctics and overcoats. She is about to go under, a phenomenon which seems to me different from but maybe not inconsequent to falling off the round spinning world. Now she is drowning and suffocating instead of falling and falling. Yet the same experience of loss of self, loss of connectedness, loss of consciousness, marks those black waves as well. Rescue? There is only the world outside. She has left the waiting room which we now see was metaphorical as well as actual, the place where as a child she waited while adulthood and awareness overcame her. The world outside is scarcely comforting. "The War was on." And she is still holding tight to specificity of date and place, her anchor to all that had overwhelmed her, that complex of woman/family/pain/vertigo and "unlikely" connectedness which threatens her with drowning and falling off the world: Outside, 10 In the mid 1950's the photographer Edward Steichen organized what quickly became the most widelyviewed photographic exhibition in human history, The Family Of Man. [The exhibition was mounted in 1955; In the Waiting Room appeared in 1976 and was included in Geography III in 1977.]. Here is how the exhibition s sponsor, the Museum of Modem Art, describes it: Photographs included in the exhibition focused on the commonalties [sic] that bind people and cultures around the world and the exhibition served as an expression of humanism in the decade following World War II. The imperative for the massive show of photographs, after the dreadful decade of war and genocide of the 1940's, was to provide an uplifting link between people and between peoples. It may well be that in the face of its perhaps too easy assertiveness, Bishop sounds this cry, that maybe it isn't all so easy to understand: To be a human being, to be part of the 'family of man,' what is that? What is that?

in Worcester, Massachusetts, were night and slush and cold, and it was still the fifth of February, 1918. It sounds a bit too easy, though it is actually not imprecise,

to suggest that the overwhelming bright/ and too hot of the previous stanza are supplanted by the cold evening air of a winter in Massachusetts. The young Elizabeth Bishop is still, as all through the poem, hanging on to the date as a seemingly firm point in a spinning universe. But what she facs, adult that she now is, is cold and night, and the and war, and the uncertainty of slush, which is neither solid nor liquid. Both the child in the poem and the adult who is looking back on that child recognize that life or being a woman, or being an adult, or belonging to a family, or being connected to the human race as full of pain and in no way easy. Let me close with a famous passage Blaise Pascal wrote in the midseventeenth century. Although Bishop's poem suggests that we as individuals are unmoored from understanding, falling, falling into incomprehension, although it proposes that our individual existence as part of the human race is undermined by a pervasive sense that human connection is confusing and unlikely, it is nonetheless a poem in which the thinking self comes to the fore. Even though that thinking self is six years and eleven months old. So we will let Pascal have the last word: Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and the advantage which the universe has over him, the universe knows nothing of this.