

Vernon Shetley: On "In the Waiting Room"

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?

"How had I come to be ? like them?" we may read this sentence as asking, and the child seems to expend an almost petulant energy in the various repetitions of this question. A number of critics have interpreted the burden of the poem as the child's sense of "connectedness," to use Bonnie Costello's term (see Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991], p. 119). Critics like Lois Cucullu and Lee Edelman imply a transformation of this sense into a feeling of solidarity along gender lines. The poem's persistent refusal to interpret itself, however, makes available another attitude toward the feelings of aversion and distress it so powerfully generates. In a draft of "the Country Mouse," the child remarked to herself, "I was in for it now ? I would get old and fat like that woman opposite me" (Elizabeth Bishop papers, Vassar College Library). When the poet asks, "What similarities ? /made us all just one?" this "just" indicates that the thought entails a sense of diminishment, one that makes the child resist this levelling equivalence of self and other. The young Elizabeth might be seen as rejecting with all her energies the horrifying knowledge that she is like the people with whom she shares the waiting room. This knowledge is presented in imagery that resembles that of "At the Fishhouses," where knowledge is presented as a burning, uninhabitable liquid: "The waiting room was bright / and too hot. It was sliding / beneath a big black wave, / another, and another." Indeed. The entire world seems to become insufficiently distinct and separate, as the "night and slush" outside echo the "big black wave" breaking inside.

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