

C. K. Doreski: On "In the Waiting Room"

"In the Waiting Room" may be seen as a prelapsarian poem of anticipation of that social state that precedes the acceptance of received namings; "Crusoe in England" may be read as a postlapsarian meditation on the originating power of naming and renaming. In reinventing the social world that connects the two, she seems willing to reconsider all forms of "name" appropriation: place, family, sex, generation, things. Discovering a world where (as Stevens found) "Mrs. Anderson's Swedish baby / Might well have been German or Spanish," she then rejects all such forms of naming as well as (what Foucault calls) "author construction." Each poem reenacts "birth, procreation, and death" as a debate between naming and unnamings, the loss imposed by a social (i.e., authorial) identity.

In 1961, Bishop wrote "The Country Mouse," a posthumously published memoir dedicated to her childhood return to Worcester, Massachusetts, after a lengthy stay with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia. Were it not for its startlingly revealing conclusion, the memoir, in spite of its abundance of details, would suffer from (by Bishop's own standards) insignificance. In the final paragraphs, however, which constitute the nucleus of "In the Waiting Room," Bishop begins to trouble over the obvious: the social obligation of being human. Having been jolted into awareness of her adoptive family's class status (hers was a family with servants), she recalls with equal sensitivity the strangeness of being a human being. As she waits for her aunt in the dentist's waiting room:

I felt . . . myself. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt I, I, I, and looked at the three strangers in panic. I was one of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs. "You're in for it now," something said. How had I got tricked into such a false position? I would be like that woman opposite who smiled at me so falsely every once in a while.

The history of identity is bound to the memory of its occasion. The response is visceral, not intellectual:

"You are you," something said. "How strange you are, inside looking out. You are not Beppo, or the chestnut tree, or Emma, you are you and you are going to be you forever." It was like coasting downhill, this thought, only much worse, and it quickly smashed into a tree. Why was I a human being?

The fact of this prerational recognition scene resides in the primacy of childhood identity. The duplicity the child hears and sees in the adult world can only be named by those understudy pronouns: I and you. While dogs, trees, and even servants have names, this as yet unnamed child wrestles with but a taxonomic classification: human.

"In the Waiting Room" marks Bishop's return to these issues of naming and unnamings, reading and writing, sounding and hearing. Though descriptive, the poem depends less on

physical detail and more upon a dialogue between the unnamed (socially unrestricted) self?"I"and the named (socially restricted)?"an I." The child initially finds security in proper names: "Worcester, Massachusetts" and "Aunt Consuelo." The certainty fades with the appearance of the intrusive, indefinite pronoun: "It was winter. It got dark / early" [my emphasis]. Bishop will rely upon the ambiguity of "it" and its corresponding reluctance or inability to name throughout the poem.

Left alone, the child "I" sees and reads the named National Geographic. Its "studied photographs" reveal an unpredictable, eruptive (prelapsarian) landscape. Literacy fails, except as an escape route, where metaphor is concerned. Investigating scenes from this magazine, she catalogues that which she can name: volcano erupting, Osa and Martin Johnson. Properly attired people bear names: "Osa and Martin Johnson"; dead people lose their names: "'Long Pig,' the caption said." Orality and literacy compete for the child's attention, each seductive in its way. But she mishears what "the caption sa[ys]": "A dead man slung on a pole / --"Long Pig." Mimicking the instability of spoken language and substituting a euphemism for a proper name, the conversational caption confuses the earnest student, who fails to understand that the dead man is here regarded as a food source.

The verbal unknown occasions further confusion as the child's eye traces the physical, sexual uncertainties of uncovered women. So foreign are the native unnamed women "with necks / wound round and round with wire" that the child "reads" right through them: "I read it straight right straight through. / I was too shy to stop" [emphasis added]. Unable to name, the child resorts to the tense comfort of the unnamed: "it." She retreats from the shifting planes of unnamed, unnamable uncertainty to the fixity of that which bears a name: "the cover: / the yellow margins, the date." Such is the force of Dickinson's notch in the maelstrom.

Unable to read her way into the larger constellation of human beings, the child nevertheless recognizes the sounded family identity when she hears it. Like the auditor in "The Country Mouse," this child hears from the inside out. History and memory fuse, creating a new identity for her:

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.

The intensity of this "it" draws upon the accumulated chain of reference: "winter," "dark early," "Babies with pointed heads," "horrifying breasts," and Aunt Consuelo's "oh! of pain." Acceding to the social demands, the effect of her aunt's voice, the child involuntarily discovers her own collective voice: I becomes we. Dates, like names or Aunt Consuelo's voice, momentarily pierce the surface of the "cold, blue-black space" the sea of habit threatening the child's consciousness. She has lost perceived autonomy even as she has gained a social identity.

Cautiously authorial, the child reads this new self as a mode of being. For the moment the discovery is personal, familial. This is not an attempt to place a "Bishop" in context; rather, it is an opportunity to feel a "self" move forward and backward into genealogy, into time:

But I felt: you are an I, you are an Elizabeth, you are one of them.

Unlike the familial significance attributed to Lowell by Bishop, the effectiveness of Bishop's self-reading derives from the strategic use of the second person. As if to demonstrate her presence in the text, she removes her self from it long enough to proclaim a social identity, to name her self. This somewhat grudging sensation, verified spontaneously by the child's reaction to her aunt's cry, suggests the child's plight as it would seem from the outside. It recalls the Stevensian self: "Detect[ing] the sound of a voice that doubles its own." However "unlikely" or "strange" these binding "similarities" seem to the child they are the social facts of her life. Though they seem to her unauthorized, breasts, boots, the National Geographic, and the family voice nonetheless constitute homogenizing social realities. By adhering to the laws of pronominal reference, Bishop intensifies the almost Ibsenlike (recall the Button-molder of Peer Gynt) threat to an artist's emerging identity.

While "In the Waiting Room" has been routinely read as a poem of juvenile terror, isolation, and marginality, none of those readings account for the remarkable counterforce of the solitary "Me-Myself-I," the artist's isolated yet assertive self. Even if the unnamed self (as seen from the inside out) threatens to fail or consume, it remains the volatile poetry voice for Bishop. She may require (what Beckett calls) a "temporal specification"? "fifth / of February, 1918"? to allow her "to measure the days that separate [her] from that menace" (that which threatens identity). The "falling off" enacted in this poem is the fall into social identity, restrictive or inaccurate naming. The alternative seems to be the "big black wave" of annihilation or namelessness. To be "back in it" is to survive with a social surface? name, age, gender, place? at odds with the continually unnamed self. "The War was on" presages a career intensely committed to slipping the yoke of social identity and changing the rules of the name game.

The child of "In the Waiting Room" advances with uncertainty from the passivity of reader to the tentative aggressiveness of writer? to the authority of authorship. The socializing power of language itself lures the unnamed I into the realm of a given and feminine name? and perilously into the beyond of collective, pronominal identity: "one of them." This rush of potential identities refuses to pause at the brink of authorial privilege? Elizabeth + Bishop? and instead accelerates into the swirl of them. Refusing even gender specificity (recalling that in her memoir, Bishop ends with the more general "Why was I a human being?"), retaining no element of uniqueness, this identity is as good as none.

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