

Even before reading Virginia Woolf's collection of memoir essays entitled *Moments of Being*, I had long been struck by the idea of the moment of being (though I had no name for it) at the end of Elizabeth Bishop's long poem "In the Waiting Room." Little Elizabeth is waiting for her "foolish, timid" Aunt Consuela to be finished with her dentist appointment. Little Elizabeth is leafing through National Geographics, horrified by the strange, to her, cultures she is introduced to in the photographs... She thinks she hears her aunt's cry of pain from inside the dentist's office, but realizes she is the one who cried out. The adult Elizabeth writes about that moment in the following way:

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.

Virginia Woolf wrote that a self is flexible and changes through time and we have many "moments of being", flashes of keen and altering self-awareness, throughout our lives. I am most intrigued by those first childhood awakenings to Being a self.

Let your poem today deal with an early memory of a Moment of Being, a first recognition of your humanness, your place in the world, or a conscious awareness of your very existence. If you can't think of such an early moment, write about any moment that altered your self-awareness and changed how you've lived in the world.

There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.

Graham Greene

Excerpt from: "Fragments for the End of the Year":

I appreciate my wide beveled spatula which fulfills
the moment I realized I would grow up and own such things

Jennifer K. Sweeney

from : *How to Live on Bread and Music*

I will never forget the appearance within me, which I have
never yet told anyone, when I was present at the birth of my self-
awareness. I can give the exact time and place. It was morning, and I
stood as a very young child in the doorway, looking left toward the
woodpile. Suddenly the inner view, "I am an I, shot before me like a
bolt of lightning from heaven, and has remained ever since.

Jean Paul

quoted by Michael Lipson in his book

Be: An Alphabet of Astonishment

The body is smooth, slender, luminous,
perfect —so pale bright. It could be carved
from marble, so still as it lay there.
The man's head is turned to one side.

The boy is shaken by this vision,
its searing light, his sudden place
as witness to what he knows
no one wants him to see.

In years to come he will recall
the moment so many times
he'll start to believe this was the day
he arrived within his own body, crawled
up inside to watch the world through its eyes.

Tom Driscoll

excerpt from a much longer poem "The Clarity of Water"
section One: "Born Out of Water"

in *The Champion of Doubt*

(In this section, a handicapped uncle has drowned)

Moments of Being, early or later in life can be seen as gates through which we come into the world, into ourselves...as in this poem by Marie Howe:

The Gate

I had no idea that the gate I would step through
to finally enter this world

would be the space my brother' body made. He was
a little taller than me: a young man
but grown, himself by then,
done at twenty-eight, having folded every sheet,

rinsed every glass he would ever rinse under the cold
and running water.

This is what you have been waiting for, he used to say to me.
And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This—holding up my cheese and mustard
sandwich.
And I'd say, What?

And he'd say, This sort of looking around.

Marie Howe
anthologized in *Risking Everything:*
110 Poems of Love and Revelation
(Marie's brother died of AIDS)