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# The Owl Question

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*May  
Swenson*  
POETRY AWARD SERIES



The  
Owl  
Question

*poems by*  
***Faith Shearin***

foreword by  
Mark Doty

THE OWL  
QUESTION



May Swenson  
Poetry Award Series

THE OWL  
QUESTION

*poems*  
*by*

Faith Shearin

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*For Tom and Mavis*





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## FOREWORD

*The Owl Question* BEGINS IN EAGER INNOCENCE, A LONGING TO KNOW the world:

. . . how will I fit all this life in one life?  
I need a map, a vocabulary list; I can't learn the world  
fast enough. I want to be like the girl upstairs who has braced  
herself before a grand piano and taught her own blind fingers to sing.

Faith Shearin's narrative is the story of a sentimental education. But it isn't all the familiar version, in which a youthful pilgrim learns to see with increasingly disenchanted eyes. Instead, there's something knowing in Shearin's innocence to begin with, and likewise something perennially innocent in her knowing. Experience offers not only "the owl question" but inescapable others:

. . . Four formal  
questions in the book that turns a family into trees:  
When did you come? Who did you meet?  
Who did you make? How did you fall away?

Eager as the speaker in these poems is to put on the bonds of love, she knows from the beginning that affections are never uncomplicated, and that what we desire is also fraught with dangers:

. . . I imagined I could try on wife like  
a fake fur coat and the way I looked in it would  
make me laugh. Instead, wife was like gaining  
fifty pounds, all on my ass, or waiting for bad news  
from a doctor.

What she wishes, wisely, is to be able to love and to see clearly at once. She understands that to do so will require all her resources: irony, good cheer, truthfulness, humor, and a carefully preserved attention to the strangeness of living, the peculiarity of all our enterprises. The result is a lovely, trustworthy first book, full of affection and wry clarity, "all life's finite hope leaning closer for a kiss."

Mark Doty



THE OWL  
QUESTION





You did, you loved, your feet  
are sore. It's dusk. Your daughter's tall.

*Thomas Lux*  
(from *The Drowned River*)

The masseur said:  
The sound for the throat is Ah.  
The sound for the heart is Who.

*Richard McCann*  
(from *Ghost Letters*)



## PIANO LESSON

My eyes open before the sun drops its yolk into the sky  
and a girl upstairs is practicing scales. I imagine the arch  
of her hand, the way her skirt might pause above the knee.

In the street I hear a victim, a paper cup, a man who talks  
physics with a pigeon; a pair of girls blow bubblegum bubbles  
at the sky. Perhaps an old woman dreams her childhood  
on a park bench while the man beside her decides to leave  
his wife. The world is complicated: an open window,  
my head pressed to a pillow where I find a tidal action:  
so many bodies rolling onto the planet, so many others  
turning back. In a café I may someday light a cigarette,  
remember the last person who did not love me, open my  
mouth to see if it speaks smoke or words. But these days  
I wake up wondering: how will I fit all this life in one life?  
I need a map, a vocabulary list; I can't learn the world  
fast enough. I want to be like the girl upstairs who has braced  
herself before a grand piano and taught her own blind fingers to sing.

## HOMECOMING

This was how I leaned, gently, against  
a window: my eyes like the lightest  
frost as my family sat down to dinner.

To see them from a distance was to see  
a flock of birds unfolding in the sky.  
I can't tell you enough of their tragic

beauty: the eager wings, the sounds  
they made for love. I was standing  
with a darkness which, like a cat,

might have eaten them whole but they  
were blind to this. They were having  
a holiday and even their dreams seemed

to come from a wind to the north. I can  
tell you how a tree glowed behind them  
and their gifts, unopened, longed to be

ripped. I can tell you how the darkness  
melted away from me when I walked in among  
them. Love sank deep as teeth or claws.

## LUCK

Beneath the suburbs is a place to be late and wrong.  
Plain and unlucky, I have visited many times.  
Some days I feel a sinking towards that land  
of blunders and my shirt turns to polyester,  
my laugh goes so sharp it breaks bones. The first  
time was a Halloween I spent with a distant cousin.  
He is always in that under place: so drab even  
mosquitoes overlook him. We spent the night  
beside a silent phone, dressed as eggs, our hands  
folded like bad cards. Once you've been under,  
something shifts; you always go back. In recent years  
I have gone there to miss trains, read maps  
backwards, pay the rent twice and starve.  
Sometimes I'm moving down a perfectly flat sidewalk  
and falling. Once you've been, the other losers  
are obvious: you see them knocking over  
glass figurines, describing oral sex to the man  
who cleans their teeth. They invite ten to dinner  
and find themselves chewing alone. In a crowd  
the unlucky throw the lucky off balance,  
everyone's feet begin to squeak. When I was small  
I loved a girl who gathered light by breathing;  
her mouth was warm as sleep. Sitting close,  
I would glow from looking at her, borrow shine  
like a moon. My mother once explained:  
we can't all be beautiful; even a gaunt field  
feels the cold kiss of morning.

## CHILDHOOD

When ancient Egyptians died the ones who survived them said they had gone west. This is what my third grade teacher told us in the dim light of a museum room lined with mummies.

I wanted to break the glass around each beautiful sarcophagus and sing in the afterworld of the ones who lived before me.

Egyptians thought hard about the needs of the deceased and even their bodies, so useless without life, were salt-dried and wrapped in fine linen for the journey. In the afterlife Egyptians were heavy with treasure, books, sometimes whole pyramids which, my teacher said, was like vacationing with the kitchen sink.

I pressed my face to glass and believed I read the pictures painted by hands since turned to dust. This was the story of a pharaoh but I saw he was a child like any other. I could tell his parents loved him: their faces drawn in profile, their arms crossed like sticks. He had a pet cat and a pet bird and the cat was kind while the bird was dark and unseen. One day the bird moved over the pharaoh's bed and spoke its true name which was death. The song of that bird has come down through the ages so I was not surprised by notes light enough to reach my ears. That day I entered the pharaoh's long-gone bedroom though my teacher told me I was a child standing in a museum. Later that year my teacher, caught stealing dresses, would hide from police by flying, so quietly, to the west.

## ENTROPY

My mother's kitchen was asleep.  
Our family didn't gather there:  
we lived and ate in our bedrooms  
hypnotized by the blue lights of tv.  
But, in her kitchen, pots and pans  
floated, belly up, in the week-old  
water, and our garbage, smiling,  
outgrew its bag. All of this very  
slowly, as if in a dream. My mother  
despises what can never truly  
be done so she does not care for cooking  
or cleaning. If one cooks a fine dinner  
one must wash the dishes to cook  
a fine breakfast to wash the dishes  
to cook a fine lunch and so on. My mother  
explained this one afternoon in the basement  
where the laundry grew around us like trees.

Our jungle-home was a metaphor for  
my mother giving in to entropy.  
When wine spilled on the couch and we  
laughed as the stain unfurled,  
we were embracing chaos. When we  
fell asleep with the lights on  
and the tv talking, we were  
the weeds in our own garden.

My mother's kitchen was haunted.  
Her refrigerator leaned to one  
side and made only brown ice.  
Her biscuits were as flat as plates.  
But none of this mattered because  
we were forgetting ourselves  
even as we were becoming ourselves.  
We pursued truth, beauty,  
the meaning of life while

my mother's kitchen discovered  
decay. All this unraveling—  
moldy food, newspapers  
piling up to the ceiling.  
We loved each other like that:  
bananas going black on the counter,  
lines coming in around our eyes.



## PUBERTY

When the school nurse came to us her hands  
were damp as little clams. I still remember the movie  
she showed: how the sperm flicked their tails  
and the big egg seemed to laugh. Our bodies  
were filled with the mystery of astronauts in places  
we would never visit. When the nurse said erection  
I saw a space shuttle and when she said blood I saw  
the red rings of Mars. Scientists may have labeled  
our parts but they said nothing of the shooting stars  
each time the right boy reached for my hand. Sex Ed took  
less than an hour that day but it was the subject  
that exploded within us. One kid killed for it, some died  
of it, and others—quiet as light—visited the forbidden  
planets and came back weightless with wonder.

## RUINS

The first one was in Michigan and I loved him  
like I was digging in a foreign land and he was  
the ruin I came to discover. Michigan is as cold  
as people imagine and when I remember him now  
he is leaned against one of those gaudy American  
cars, big as boats, and all but his face is lost  
in layers. This was a campus full of kids in knickers  
and baby blue sweaters who, when they laughed, shielded  
their mouths with mittened hands. I longed to uncover  
flesh the same way I longed to uncover earth in a place  
where winter long outstayed its welcome. I wanted  
my beauty, whatever it was, held up to my blind eye  
and described; I thought loving was the same as  
sifting down through ash to find Pompeii. In Michigan  
there were layers of snow and layers of clothing  
and with that first boy it was as if I kept undressing  
until I was naked but I found a way, that young, to take  
off more. Down in the dirt of each other every clue we  
uncovered was not enough. The snow did not stop falling  
and now, a decade later, there is the shape of him outlined  
again and again until he is larger but less detailed:  
a relic from the ancient landscape explaining me.

## THE OWL QUESTION

White night fills the forest of my life: I am traveling in disguise.  
This week I am myself the way my lover would like me to be:  
smiling like I've seen life's meaning floating on a fat balloon,  
talking false prophesies better than the men who made the emperor  
nothing, then called it clothes. I am altered by every person who  
loves me with ifs—if only I were myself but not myself, if only  
we were the sort of lovers who felt passion the way oysters  
feel salt water (an opened mouth at the full growth of the moon,  
our hearts timed by one tide). I'm walking on ice and the dress  
I wear is the weight my sister likes best; my hair is after  
a Monet painting. Wherever I turn I am walking in the clear prints  
of another person. I am rarely alone so this big-tree silence  
surprises me: it asks the question owls have pondered for years.  
Surely I am pure beneath the layers I've grown for love. I am  
as honest as any animal with an arched back, a sigh, a new camouflage.

## WHAT I LIKE

Not the party itself—a flurry of uncomfortable moments—and laughter that really means something else. Not the moment just after the party is over when we fall onto the sofa, dishes scattered everywhere, cigarette butts floating in soda, a single untouched piece of pie on the coffee table. What I like is the day after the party: the signs of guests mostly erased, balloons tied to the pantry but flying a little lower. The leftover food mummified in the fridge. I like remembering that the room was full without standing in a full room. Silence pours in like water and I swim alone: a fish in an empty aquarium.

## RESCUE

My mother tells me how she wanted to save the iguana.  
At home, by herself, she heard the ocean reaching to lick  
her face. And above the trees, in a cottage with flamingo legs,  
my mother saw how all her children had finally turned

to fish, waving her away with sleek tails like scarves.

In our absence, these long years while we swim, my mother  
dreams of eggs swelling in the oven, of bread that will  
never rise; she can't remember when the iguana first took ill.

She says he was our pet, not hers. She tells me how she came  
to him with food he could not swallow and held it tight  
against his tongue. He had glow lamps, an exotic oil  
no one can know how she wanted him to live. Some nights,

in strong winds, the iguana watched my mother knit sweaters  
no fish could move in. He licked his two teeth, told her  
every pecking loop she made was perfect. The iguana liked tv  
until his fever set in. He liked my mother's restrained laughs

like hiccups. I imagine them together the moment he died:  
my mother wrapping him in layers like a mummy

giving him death with her love.

## NUMBERS

An older woman told me how it was when her father died.

We were in a diner beside Madison Avenue and the waiters wore so much white she was reminded of heaven. The woman said she learned the news about her father then spent a year adding figures. She had always disliked math and didn't know why she multiplied her rent by her dental bills but found herself doing this all the time. She wrote her salary at the top of blank pages, circled in red ink: a tired eye. I looked down at my nicest dress which was worn at the bottom like an old curtain. I thought of my grandfather who lived across the street from his parents until he was seventy and they were ninety. Each morning he looked through his kitchen into the big window of his parents' living room. At a certain hour, each day, his father lifted the curtain on that window and tied it back like hair. This meant his parents were awake and well and a new day had begun. Of course there was the day when the curtain did not lift and many other days afterwards when my grandfather stood alone in his kitchen counting.

## RETRIEVER

My father, in middle age, falls in love with a dog.  
He who kicked dogs in anger when I was a child,  
who liked his comb always on the same shelf,  
who drank martinis to make his mind quiet.

He who worked and worked—his shirts  
wrapped in plastic, his heart ironed  
like a collar. He who—like so many men—  
loved his children but thought the money

he made for them was more important  
than the rough tweed of his presence.  
The love of my father's later years is  
a Golden Retriever—more red

than yellow—a nervous dog who knows  
his work clothes from his casual ones,  
can read his creased face, who waits for  
him at the front door—her paws crossed  
like a child's arms. She doesn't berate him  
for being late, doesn't need new shoes  
or college. There is no pressure to raise her  
right, which is why she chews the furniture,  
pees on rugs, barks at strangers who  
cross the lawn. She is his responsible soul  
broken free. She is the children he couldn't  
come home to made young again.

She is like my mother but never angry,  
always devoted. He cooks for his dog—  
my father who raised us in restaurants—  
and takes her on business trips like

a wife. Sometimes, sitting beside her  
in the hair-filled van he drives to make  
her more comfortable, my father's dog  
turns her head to one side as if

thinking and, in this pose, more than  
one of us has mistaken her for a person.  
We would be jealous if she didn't make  
him so happy—he who never took  
more than one trip on his expensive  
sailboat, whose Mercedes was wrecked  
by a valet. My mother saw him behind  
the counter of a now-fallen fast food  
restaurant when she was nineteen.  
They kissed beside a river where fish  
no longer swim. My father who was  
always serious has fallen in love with  
a dog. What can I do but be happy for him?



## INVITATION

The cab is a snake and she is inside its belly  
like a swallowed egg. A boy invited her home,  
to dinner, which left her hands so cold  
she bought swaddled flowers. The floral package  
waits beside her thigh, on the seat, and each sharp  
turn stirs it towards a door where the twelve  
Marigold mouths open and close. She knows the boy's mother  
will rip the paper around the buds and squint.  
Like many other offers this invitation came  
in code and she is unsure of its meaning. She wants the dinner  
to be about hunger and flesh since her own flesh wants  
and wants and she could join the other guests  
easily: eyes narrowed, tongue darting. But the dinner is more likely  
about love and chewing, about the moment when the father  
will open his spotted hands and ask her questions  
like a God. She believes the flesh is only following the mind  
which makes its movements angelic. The mind is grey  
and unseen. If these streets were made of rippled sand  
she might have left marks to reflect on, but there is no sense  
in looking back. Even in transit her body asks for heat  
and dreams: a love to move above it  
like a sky. The body demands pleasure to starve off fear.  
She longs to leave the worry of living but has accepted  
an invitation. She imagines this is the way we all come to earth.

## MATRIMONY

When I went to visit I was, for one week, his wife.  
The house was small and well formed like it might  
belong to a doll. Mornings, he went to work and, while  
he was gone, I walked from room to room in search of  
my brain. There was a dog that longed to be walked  
or fed and most days I ignored him the same way

I ignored myself. On the third day, I had a fever  
and I could feel that any word I might utter would  
lose its meaning. At first I had been a fine wife—  
spotless dishes, low-cut dresses—but I was shrinking  
and soon I would not matter as much as the dog.

Whenever the phone rang it was not for me  
and when the plumber came to fix the sink he asked  
if my parents were home. Luckily, my husband came  
back from his long day and uttered the words  
“comfort” and “reason”. He did not notice my small  
voice or my boiled head and we smiled and smiled

like we wanted to blind one another with sharp  
white light. I imagined I could try on wife like  
a fake fur coat and the way I looked in it would  
make me laugh. Instead, wife was like gaining  
fifty pounds, all on my ass, or waiting for bad news

from a doctor. When a person pretends marriage  
they are brought in from the wild and placed naked  
in a cement cell. A popcorn-crunching crowd comes  
close and stares. On the plane home I was served  
dinner for one and, afterwards, my tray table stayed  
in the forward and upright position. I found my brain:  
on my head all along like a useless pair of glasses.

## ENGAGED

This was the summer I folded shirts in a shop where the lights were as bright as the flames of hell. I lived on an island off an island and every village had an Indian name. It was June and, come October, I would marry a man so many states away I could not remember the heat of his skin. I thought of Indians when I accepted rides from strangers: smiling my way into foreign cars, hoping foreignness would bring me back to myself or open the box I kept drawing around my life. Maybe an Indian reasoned this way when he offered his hand to we who would rob him of everything? This was the summer my friends stopped calling, by chance, all of them poor and out of love. It seemed love was intended for no one: I could not remember a season when I was lifted by its salt as if by an ocean. Each time the phone rang the man I was months from promising my future to would light up like a fire fly then, quickly, vanish into dark. I suppose I wanted to hold him, as if in a mason jar, and watch the movements of his wings. Nights, bodies of flies pressed against my bedroom window, I looked for a name or a meaning to give anything. Why was I born and why did I stand all day in a hot shop folding shirts? Who was the man I agreed to marry? Why did I want him until I was raw with wanting and why did I go on wanting long after I willed myself to stop? Why did he never say he could not live without me? Why did he never cry: his hands unable to reach my body, our lives so short? I didn't know that marriage was a war for territory: families giving up beloved children, the walk to the place you make home like a trail of tears. When I was twenty-five I wanted love to save me: a costumed dance and a name for the way I was related. I didn't know I would never have a name for so many things that mattered, would never belong to anyone other than myself.

## AFTER THE WEDDING

Leaves on the lawn twist sideways  
    in this white night wind and my parents,  
        weary from days of standing, drop  
their shoes to the floor like stones. Aren't the windows  
    around us cold and gaping amid such change?  
        Won't you kiss me in the empty dance hall  
where blue balloons fall over us like rain? Four formal  
    questions in the book that turns a family into trees:  
        When did you come? Who did you meet?  
Who did you make? How did you fall away? Answers  
    come the way babies come: as kisses leave the lips,  
        as hearts love, or cease to beat, and the world  
is made different in a day.

## LUST

Blue Friday I walk to the wine and cheese shop  
in my sleep. I'm wearing pajamas and the man  
behind the counter blows smoke rings at my eyes.  
His cat crawls up from a cold cellar and the dust  
in its fur is too blue to describe. All I want is  
a pair of wine glasses and ruby kisses on my thighs.  
Sex should be easy—what animals do, what we do  
to forget our own end. In my dreams a wine and cheese  
man leans across inches of pine to tell me why I feel  
blind attraction. There's a world of wine and cheese,  
he says, and his blue cat agrees—a place where faceless  
couples lean together and savor the aged in human nature.  
What could be more old fashioned than lust? I am the spider  
killing her mate, the fish swimming from egg to grave.  
Friday, blue Friday, even in my sleep I am awake with desire.

## DESIRE

The act of standing, penniless, in a store  
where one might buy the porcelain skin  
of beauty, the hot flowers of love, or glasses  
so strong they see the other side of death.  
The moment when a lover's mouth begins its  
descent into flesh: a butterfly into forest.

## PANDORA

Maybe I am the box and all the life  
I find myself in is Pandora.  
When my husband recalls an old  
college lover—out spins envy—  
a green fly with long eyelashes.  
And my paycheck cashed with ten  
dollars left in the bank is greed:  
a bright-eyed spider and her honey  
web. Lust is a white rabbit  
and sloth is a hippo  
sleeping in mud. Hate is a snake  
expelled from the ears like heat.  
Greeks believed people were pure  
before Zeus sent down Pandora  
with her suitcase of miseries:  
a visitor with too much curiosity.  
I'm sure she was always here  
and there was no lid to lift. Like Eve  
she brought the human race what  
we already had. I am skeptical  
of gardens and golden ages. Pandora,  
we are told, saved hope but I don't  
believe this either. She was childish,  
silly: a new bride. She swallowed hope  
the way the young swallow expectation.  
She needed to fit in. Hope swelled  
in her belly—a seed—and was born  
again in blood, without eyes.

## THE POST OFFICE

I once met a woman who wanted to marry the mailman,  
the milkman, or the tooth fairy in a large white house  
where the wind always whistled through the windows.  
I could tell she had touched all her teeth with her own  
tongue, swallowed milk without chocolate powder,  
and sent love poems to businessmen in Chicago. She knew

I knew the answer to her dreams and I said: when the mailman  
passes on a sidewalk or smiles beside the ice cream parlor  
ask him how many letters are love letters and how many times  
he has carried words against his thighs. He hears the deep  
sighs of envelopes even when he laughs. He wants  
to place his hands inside everybody's mailbox.



## THE UNEXPECTED

“We have news,” my husband says to his parents. We’re sitting in their living room, near a bay window, and we’re enveloped by heavenly white light. “We’re not pregnant,” my husband announces, “We’ve decided not to have a baby this year.”

“That’s fantastic,” his parents say. They stand and walk towards us, their arms opened like the wings of great birds. I already have a certain glow. “How do you feel?” everyone asks me and I smile. “A little nauseous,” I say, “but mostly alright.” My husband’s father asks what we will name it. He is tall and gentle and he places

his hands in his pockets like a child. “We’ll have to wait and see how it doesn’t look,” my husband says, “There’s so much of nothing ahead.” A few months later, there is a shower in our honor. I wear a striped bathing suit. My husband wears a thong. “Here are some things you won’t need,” the relatives say, “We’re so happy for you.” We grin and glow from all the attention. We admire our shiny

new crib, our stroller with detachable car seat, our rattle, our lifetime supply of pampers. “Who do you suppose it will look like?” an aunt asks. “No one we know,” my husband assures her. “Do you think you’re ready?” my mother asks. “It’s hard to feel prepared,” I say, “So much is unknown.”

Everyone nods and I serve a very sweet cake. It is chocolate with strawberry icing and there is a picture of the future on top. In the picture, we are all old or sick or dead and there is a blue sky overhead. The world goes on without us.

Six months later, we drive to the hospital and sit in the waiting room smoking an expensive cigar. We watch some nurses try to revive a man who has swallowed a bottle of aspirin. He has white hair and his hands are thick and twisted like roots. "I feel as if we've been waiting forever," my husband says. I tell him to think of how I feel. Twenty hours later, nothing happens. We call our parents from the hospital. "We have news," we say, "We have given birth to nothing." We all weep together, into our phones, our puffy faces wet against the receivers.

The next day, everyone comes to our apartment to have a look. I carry nothing in my arms. It feels light and heavy all at the same time. "Our future," my mother says. Her eyes fill with salt water. The nothing is helpless and unformed: I feel a deep burning in my heart.

## OUR STORY

We hate the future in early fall.  
You are worn and I am sorrow  
if sorrow is a woman who cannot see.  
Tell me our story. Were we perfect  
at seventeen? Did we make love  
in a hotel shower while someone  
nearby knocked and pleaded into  
the night? Did you visit New York  
in mourning? Did we meet on a  
train platform where men folded  
newspapers and buildings leaned  
together like lies? Was it like that?  
Did we whisper while the elevator  
went down? Did we leave our clothes  
on a Cape Cod dune then remember  
a low-flying plane? Did we marry  
and move to a cottage by the sea?  
So much of the story already told.  
The dresses I wore; the expressions  
you wore. Our pictures in a box  
in the closet. Who could blame us  
for refusing to write the rest? Somewhere  
there will be trouble, somewhere  
an unhappy ending. Inevitably, an ending.

## THE NAME OF A FISH

If winter is a house then summer is a window  
in the bedroom of that house. Sorrow is a river  
behind the house and happiness is the name  
of a fish who swims downstream. The unborn child  
who plays the fragrant garden is named Mavis:  
her red hair is made of future and her sleek feet  
are wet with dreams. The cat who naps  
in the bedroom has his paws in the sun of summer  
and his tail in the moonlight of change. You and I  
spend years walking up and down the dusty stairs  
of the house. Sometimes we stand in the bedroom  
and the cat walks towards us like a message.

Sometimes we pick dandelions from the garden  
and watch their white heads blow open  
in our hands. We are learning to fish in the river  
of sorrow; we are undressing for a swim.

## MAGIC

I learned the secrets from a dark smelling  
book in the old country. I know the shape  
of wild geese in the sky of my dreams  
means I will marry more than once. Should rain  
fall on a blue summer day and the shower  
is over even as it begins this betokens  
the luck of a fox's wedding and any wish

I make will come true. I know the new moon  
is the Bride's moon, the full moon is Druid,  
the old moon brings the Nights of Morgana:  
a darkness, a time of no magic. If I want  
answers I can slice, blindly, a pair of white  
ribbons or I can lie down among the owls.

I believe in teacups speaking in leaves,  
in dreaming cakes made on St. Faith's Day,  
in the wisdom of Dove's eggs and early  
tulips. Years before my birth my mother  
fasted all Midsummer's Eve and, at night,  
lay a lace cloth near a window. She spread  
bread and ale on a plate and opened  
a screened door to the wind. I came into  
the room: her future daughter, her one  
true love, and the toast we drank was  
to a mutual unknown. Later, in a hospital,  
under lights and drugs, my face swam  
towards hers like an eel's and she said  
she would have known me anywhere. I was not  
raised in the thin pews of a church. I do  
not cross myself or fall to my knees  
with sin; bible stories are too bloody  
for my liking. But I have loved superstition,

old wives' tales, any card or potion  
that pretends to tell the truth. I know  
the truth is anyone's guess: a white shirt,  
if you will, placed on a tree limb before  
a fire. On St. Mark's Eve, as the dusk  
closes in, and the dew falls over a nearby  
garden, lift your eyes and watch the arms  
of the shirt. You will say they are moving,  
talking, magically assuming a shape—  
the shape of wind, perhaps, or a life.

## FROGS

In the winter of my third grade year five men stood at the door of my classroom holding forty buckets of frogs. The frogs were dead and soaked in formaldehyde so they looked like wet vegetables dug up on some other planet. The girls around me let out a low moan of disgust. Our teacher, Mrs. Winslow, was an oddity: a juvenile diabetic who liked mini-skirts and clove cigarettes—sometimes she shot insulin into her thin arms in front of the class. She had decided we needed the frogs to teach us what went on beneath the skin; she liked to shock. I remember the look of pleasure on her face when the men placed the buckets, in rows, near our desks.

I was a child so I was curious and not afraid. I did not mind the smell of the frogs or the fact of their death and I smiled when I sliced open the thick skin on their backs. Our teacher said we should learn the way things are made: that, in life, we should take the unknown apart and break it down until we understood what it was. This was not bad advice. Of course this teacher did not last long—we were her first and last students—so it was important that we remember what she said. There were times when she stood before us, weeping, and read poetry from other centuries we could not understand. Once, at mid-day, she walked us into the school yard and whispered “go free”: we heard but could not move. For her I held my frog without flinching and cut each tiny organ from its body. And because of her I have taken my life apart many times, to examine it, though I have never understood what it was.

## COUNTING

I spent the first years of my life in the most delightful coma: unable to count money or read clocks. How telling this early idiocy really was. In second grade my teacher discovered the quarters in my pocket meant no more to me than the pennies and this sent her into a fury. What planet had I been sleeping on? If only she knew. Where I lived, neighborhood cats gathered for tea and trees spoke a language as quiet as dew. I imagined my own growth this way: my knee filling the space where my head had once been. Snow, a miracle I'd never seen, was two parts cloud and one part dust. Of course, my parents were determined to instruct me. They opened a card table in the living room near a window full of sky and they covered that table with coins. We spent hours together leaned over our neat stacks of dimes: I was their first child; they wanted to do everything right. I felt the penny should be worth more than the dime; I got stuck on this point. I couldn't tell the big hand from the little one on the clock. I have never liked to measure—not flour or milk—and certainly not something invisible and unfriendly like time. Days came and went. The light in my window was everything. I caught a deadly spider in a jar; I learned to play piano from an old woman I met in the street. Sometimes, at night, I heard the clock in the kitchen ticking. Sometimes my father lifted me—his bird—over a restaurant counter, enough money in my hand to settle the bill.



## INNOCENCE

*For Justin*

Every summer there was a rented house  
on the west side of town in a pastel shade  
like a pale eye or a vein. And every summer  
my two friends waited there: a brother and sister  
so alike and in love they shared a lover:  
a wild man painter who seduced them both  
by washing their hair. The sister's hair was longer  
and she told me how the painter did it  
in a bathtub with cat paws—the water above  
her like a sheet. The brother's was a baptism:  
his flesh blessed in a sink. I learned first that anyone  
can be anyone's lover. The brother and sister  
took pity on me: I didn't know the world the way  
they did. The sister led me through doll-sized  
neighborhoods to find dresses in fat women's  
garages because cloth was better if other bodies  
had filled it. The brother said stepping into  
the life of a mild housewife was worse  
than waking up in a coffin. Every idea my southern  
mother filled me with rose on my skin like a sweat.  
The sister left her body easily: in her sleep, at work,  
for full half-hours; she returned with stories like  
dark photos. She thought her hands were someone  
else's: she didn't know how to own them.

I was afraid then and I am still afraid now.  
I was seeing all the ways I could fill the world  
and I saw I could be anything: obscene, wrong,  
another person's idea of perfection. The brother  
and sister belonged only to themselves.  
They flourished like untended gardens: big-vegetabled  
beauty in a full head of weeds. It was a way of

getting older to know the sister really did leave her  
body, for good, on a car ride that went blue as sky.  
And the brother, lonely, crossed his arms and went  
limp; he got a better job than he wanted, moved  
to a city, worried he'd had too many lovers. I don't  
know what this means. I want to be younger.  
I want the sister to teach me how to feel my body  
more as a dress than a skin. I want the hope I had  
then: my hands unfolded, my thoughts  
like a mazed rat's, the world turning its face  
to me, and the face feeling wide and unhinged as a grin.

## THE SINKING

I am bent over a sink of heavenly suds  
my hands moving like angels in wind  
when I find myself weepy with work I will never  
make done. Beside me a garbage bag opens  
and fills like some hungry lung and my newest shoes  
wear the fine lines of age. Even as I gaze  
at the just-folded laundry I am seeing the first shirt  
I will open the way a diver opens water.  
As a child I wondered at my mother's lost days  
in the polite lines of banks and supermarkets:  
her head bowed as if in grief. Later I read we each lose  
years looking for lost objects and waiting for red lights  
to change. One third of our earthly time passes on in our sleep.  
After one bill is paid another moves close like an enemy.  
It's no wonder cavemen left only their own bones  
and a few reddened sketches of the hunt. My life story  
is a series of telephone bills paid too slowly and dental visits  
for cavities I can't feel. Have I mentioned the car tags  
I lost in the couch while kissing? They seem such a waste—  
these days I barely remember—doing the work that has no  
meaning, the work that will whirl on above me when my body  
has crossed its arms to everything  
and dirt loosens and falls into my heart like rain.

## WILL

In grade school an unattractive girl I knew distributed a questionnaire to our class: she had decided to change herself. She wanted our opinions on the most flattering hairstyle, the sort of clothing she should buy.

I remember being impressed—not by the questionnaire—which was simple and dull, but by her willful desire for change: she saw she was one thing and she wished to be another. I have never had such clarity of vision. Is every caterpillar also a butterfly? Does the tadpole feel its fate on land? I am the one with her back turned against change because change is death whether it disguises itself with a hat or a smile. That girl in grade school took everyone's advice. She was a smart girl, I'm told, and she made something of herself.

## MY PORTRAIT

*For Nana*

My grandmother hired a photographer to make  
a portrait of me before I went to school  
because I was the first grandchild and because  
she and I are tied together by chatter  
and flower beds and southern manners.

She spent a week teaching me Mother Goose  
nursery rhymes until I chanted perfect couplets  
about babies falling from cradles and children  
dying of plague and this convinced her  
of my genius. The portrait was lavish:

I sat in an oversized velvet chair, the top  
of which spread out like a fan, and a thin  
yellow dress rested just above my knees.  
My arms and legs were lean and crossed  
and my face—which was the face of a pretty  
child who has too often gotten her own way—  
was smiling, but only a little. For many years,  
my grandmother kept this portrait in her living room.  
She sat across from it and smoked and read  
and recreated my childhood: a time before  
her husband died, a time when life was sweet  
and dry like wine. She lived with the portrait  
while I walked away from it: out of the south,  
away from my youth; I called this getting educated.  
She waited for me, the way the older generation  
does. She waited for my return—to myself,  
to her, to long iced-tea afternoons beneath  
the trees. At twenty-five I married and,  
that Christmas, she gave the portrait to my  
husband. She said she was ready to part

with the me she knew then. My husband,  
eager to know another me, hung it on  
our bedroom wall. At first the portrait's presence  
depressed me: I looked upon my well-made  
younger self and saw that I should have been  
so much more. I hated the weak face time  
had etched for me: I wanted the long lean looks  
of a child. Then, this morning, as if a fever  
has broken, I have realized I am someone new  
every time I open my eyes. I was someone  
else a few minutes after that portrait was made  
and, again, someone else days later. We are all  
walking away from the beginning and towards  
the end. My portrait is of  
someone else, some other child.

## FIELDS

*For Henry and Irene Spruill*

My great grandfather had some fields in North Carolina  
and he willed those fields to his sons and his sons  
willed them to their sons so there is a two-hundred-year-old  
farm house on that land where several generations  
of my family fried chicken and laughed and hung

their laundry beneath the trees. There are things you  
know when your family has lived close to the earth:  
things that make magic seem likely. Dig a hole on the new  
of the moon and you will have dirt to throw away  
but dig one on the old of the moon and you won't have

enough to fill it back up again: I learned this trick  
in the backyard of childhood with my hands. If you know  
the way the moon pulls at everything then you can feel  
it on the streets of a city where you cannot see the sky.  
My mother says the moon is like a man: it changes

its mind every eight days and you plant nothing  
until its risen full and high. If you plant corn when  
the signs are in the heart you will get black spots  
in your grain and if you meet a lover when the  
signs are in the feet he will never take you dancing.

When the signs are in the bowels you must not plant  
or your seed will rot and if you want to make a baby  
you must undress under earth or water. I am the one  
in the post office who buys stamps when the signs  
are in air so my mail will learn to fly. I stand in my  
front yard, in the suburbs, and wish for luck and  
money on the new of the moon when there  
are many black nights. I may walk the streets  
of this century and make my living in an office  
but my blood is old farming blood and my true

self is underground like a potato. At the opera  
I will think of rainfall and vines. In my dreams  
all my corn may grow short but the ears will be  
full. If you kiss my forehead on a dark moon  
in March I may disappear—but do not be afraid—  
I have taken root in my grandfather's  
fields: I am hanging my laundry beneath his trees.



## FINGERPRINT OF THE VOICE

All my head was filled with, years ago, is lost now.  
So why do I still see myself days after my childhood house  
went up in blue flames? I was eight, maybe nine,  
and I was walking home from school. I remember  
the shape of the sand blowing over the dunes and the dance  
my leathery shoes made moving over cracks in the street.  
If I slide my hand into a pocket I feel the pennies and paper  
folded like birds: the things I stuffed my clothes with then.  
Maybe I remember the still day so clearly because it came  
after a catastrophe, a burning, an event that gave my life form.

But this does not explain why I have lost the memory  
of the blaze itself: my father walking through a melting  
bedroom saying my name. I have lost the language

I used with myself, all those years, in my head. Once, my mother  
scolded me for turning away from a photo of my ancestors.  
Didn't I care about the ones who had gone down before me?

How could I tell her their black eyes were like packages  
I would never open? I wanted what I still want—an impossible  
history of the thing deeper than nudity or bone:

a fingerprint of the voice of the soul.

## SUMMER

During colder months on that Carolina island we natives  
lived in neighborhoods of abandoned cottages: each one  
smelling of salt and scrubbed white by wind and sun.

As a child I walked the silent streets, ocean breathing  
by my side, and imagined a different life for myself  
inside each empty house. I reached into damp hammocks,  
stared through windows, opened screened doors  
to porches where rocking chairs moved as if in sorrow.

I played with toys summer children left behind: plastic buckets  
and shovels, naked dolls half-buried in sand. Later, grown up,

I moved to another sea-side village, walked Cape Cod beaches  
in winter—quiet salt wind—and felt my childhood move  
around me like a flock of white birds. Most Octobers

I awaken like the townspeople in Sleeping Beauty's castle—  
my hat still in my hand, months vanished like a night.

I am always waiting for summer: my lost season.

## FLAT WORLD

It occurred to her, as things sometimes do, that a child might  
unfold in the dark salt of herself like an oyster's pearl.  
This was the way the world kept its stomach full—some woman,  
fertile as an ocean, growing ripe. There was a graveyard  
on her street and the dead buried there were as old as cats.

Stories could be gathered from the thin stones above  
their slumber. Whole neighborhoods were formed by family  
plots and, even without bodies, the rich slept better

than the poor. Tombstones might have been houses  
with open windows for she could still glimpse lives  
by looking in. One woman lost four children in two years  
then, the weight of babies like an undertow, died

giving life to number five. Her husband married again  
and again as if he could not remember how to fall in love.  
What moves the living makes the dead lie back. They do not  
dream of beauty and feasts and the light head of fame.

Cemeteries made her see that the earth was as flat  
as her ancestors imagined. Without warning her own generation  
would step off into space and a grave was the last known  
land before the fall. There, the grass over their mouths  
like a blanket, human drama went quiet. The six-fingered  
spinster could no longer be seen. Those who lusted felt  
their breathing go slack: scandal could never outlast bone.

She was pregnant and she sat down  
on the hill with the coffins inside and waited.

## HUNGER

Afterwards, I worried she was hungry.  
While she was inside me I ate too much—  
dinner in rich restaurants, curries, pastas,  
little pies. I ate slowly, cautiously: I was  
never full. After a meal I liked to sit  
with a book in a tub of water and feel her  
eating too; she tugged like a fish on  
a well-baited line. Sometimes she was quiet  
then, awakened by flavor, her phantom  
dance began. I couldn't identify her parts  
tucked inside me like they were—  
she was everywhere and nowhere: a baby  
Houdini. But after I pushed her out  
and the nurses made her clean and wrapped  
her like a bouquet of flowers and I was  
wheeled to the silence of recovery  
I worried about her hunger. True, the nurses  
had their bottles and my breasts  
were filling like wine glasses but milk  
was thin when compared with the things  
we'd eaten before. I was tired but couldn't  
rest thinking of her away from me  
in the strange glare of the world  
with an empty belly. What if I could not  
be for her what I had been in pregnancy?  
What if I was not warm or salty enough?

Could I stretch and steal, as my body had,  
to make room for her? It was easier when  
I could feed her by feeding myself. Pregnant  
I had been both selfish and giving.  
Now I was no longer her container.  
When she suffered it was not in silence.

## LOVE

You grew a heart right away  
because you knew about chambers  
and pumping and love. There  
were months when the world saw  
only me with a coat pulled close  
to hide the beating of us. I couldn't  
feel you moving though you moved  
and you couldn't hear me speaking  
though I spoke. We were blind to  
each other: a potato and its earth.

## BECOMING MOTHER

Nothing prepares a woman for the way she is  
ruined: her body torn like paper, her heart  
white with violent love. Not the movies they  
show in childbirth class—no beauty just blood—  
not the baby showers where women tell stories  
as old as birds. Not a woman's own mother  
who has repaired herself by forgetting.  
In the months before birth the world  
stands still; afterwards there is only motion.

## CHILDBIRTH REVISITED

I wanted to watch myself give birth as my  
husband did: talking calmly with the doctor  
while he opened his scissors. Blood everywhere  
my husband said and the doctor touched  
his arm, told him it was always like that.  
So many witnesses: the nurse with her  
machine recording contractions like  
Seismic waves, the one with the baby  
warmer, another doctor who asked  
my husband if we'd like to keep the  
placenta. They all saw my body open,  
saw what I was made of, held my  
daughter before I did. I was stuck inside  
the birth which was like not being there  
at all. They spoke to me the way you  
might speak to someone in trouble,  
Someone a great distance away. Birth is  
awful though, at the time, I claimed  
it wasn't. I was confused: a girl too  
long at a cocktail party and told  
them, as I was being sewn shut,  
that the night reminded me  
of the flu. I felt embarrassed that such  
a thing had overtaken me, grateful  
it was over, heroic for denying  
myself their drugs. I was mad at  
the doctor for cutting me—even if  
it was for my own good, mad that  
they put me on my back to push:  
I felt defeated like that. Everyone spoke  
to my husband because he was smart  
and clothed and not ripped to pieces.



Awhile later the room was empty  
and someone came to wipe up the blood  
and I was given a stale little breakfast  
on a tray. There was light coming  
in through a window because it was  
morning now and the staff changed  
so the people who saw my labor were  
on the street in plain clothes doing  
ordinary things. One year later  
I can still see their faces, still smell  
the room where my daughter broke  
free of me like a bird lifting  
from the limb of a great tree.  
My body was stunned by emptiness—  
It was weeks before I stopped  
reaching to feel the ripple  
of her motion. During the last days  
of my pregnancy I could smell her  
through my skin: a creature so sweet  
and warm I am still hungry  
when she leaves the room.

## OPERA

One day I made her laugh.  
Such a simple thing—my head  
against her belly, my hair  
in her small hand. Her laughter  
was like walking backwards in a field  
of happiness. I tried all day to please  
her; I wanted to know every inch  
of the place she called pleasure.  
The years of love letters  
my husband and I mailed unfolded  
like tongues in an opera.

## ON HALLOWEEN

We dress our daughter in a flower suit  
and carry her door to door. She can't eat  
candy and doesn't know her name  
but seems to understand the idea  
of a holiday, a chance to travel in disguise.  
She's quiet and wide-eyed: her hands  
clasped in front of her green stalk.  
Her petal crown is so yellow it might  
be a halo. She senses her importance  
in the doorways of friends' houses  
where candy is dropped into paper sacks  
and ghosts twist to sniff  
the future in her new hair.

ASHES, ASHES

Winter is the death we have all been waiting for.  
Even at parties where the new year is praised  
branches are breaking beneath the weight of snow.  
We know this season like we will know the end  
of our lives when the living is halfway through.  
Years go the way of childhood teeth: pressed so  
hopefully beneath clean pillows. Dead skin.  
The fingernails that grow without a pulse.

An earth that swallows babies  
gives back a rash of white-eyed daisies.

## SHOPPING

My husband and I stood together in the new mall  
which was clean and white and full of possibility.  
We were poor so we liked to walk through the stores  
since this was like walking through our dreams.  
In one we admired coffee makers, blue pottery  
bowls, toaster ovens as big as televisions. In another,  
we eased into a leather couch and imagined  
cocktails in a room overlooking the sea. When we  
sniffed scented candles we saw our future faces,  
softly lit, over a dinner of pasta and wine. When  
we touched thick bathrobes we saw midnight  
swims and bathtubs so vast they might be  
mistaken for lakes. My husband's glasses hurt  
his face and his shoes were full of holes.  
There was a space in our living room where  
a couch should have been. We longed for  
fancy shower curtains, flannel sheets,  
shiny silverware, expensive winter coats.  
Sometimes, at night, we sat up and made lists.  
We pressed our heads together and wrote  
our wants all over torn notebook pages.  
Nearly everyone we loved was alive and we  
were in love but we liked wanting. Nothing  
was ever as nice when we brought it home.  
The objects in stores looked best in stores.  
The stores were possible futures and, young  
and poor, we went shopping. It was nice  
then: we didn't know we already had everything.

## ALONE

When I was younger I loved until I disappeared.

I rested my head in my hand and saw only  
the beloved: his unruly words, the chocolate  
of his eyes, each hair on his head a vine

from the soul. If we were sitting at a table—  
the other people around us, the table itself,  
the light and sound of the place where we ate,  
my own hand, even my breathing

melted away. Alone in my bedroom,  
I often felt love a second time. I pressed my palm  
to my ribs and fingered my heart. Sometimes  
my body was as foreign as a stranger's.

I filled the silence of sheets and pillows  
with myself. My thoughts, the weight of  
my hair in my hand: the room was colored  
by this. It has taken all these years to feel

myself and another at the same time. Even so,  
a fascinating speaker at a cocktail party  
will narrow my range of vision. My husband's  
face against a pillow has caused whole rooms to collapse.

## SPRING FEVER

It's not a real illness: my white-knuckled mother could even see that. I might be learning chess, another language, some skill to make me rich. Instead I've gone stupid and high as the thin breathless clouds. The saddest thoughts won't bring me back to this world. I dream of oceans and gulls: I'm on a red roof drinking Margaritas and the sun is deep in my skin, my bedroom hot thighs, long after its licked the sky. I need this:

winter has sharpened its clear teeth on much more than my boots. At night I undress so slowly it's another day. At work I faint while enlarging an article. I see boys blooming in a field where the wind knows only

my name. I'm talking about sky-filled songs in canoes without paddles, finding myself on a picnic where the wine is free and sex turns everyone to swans. I want the world to love me careless and blinded. I want to lose my fear in a season of parties: confetti on my face, all life's finite hope leaning closer for a kiss.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

FAITH SHEARIN WAS A FELLOW AT THE FINE ARTS WORK CENTER IN Provincetown and writer-in-residence at Interlochen Arts Academy. Her poems have appeared in journals like *Ploughshares*, *Chicago Review*, *Poetry Northwest* and many others. She has worked in a taffy store, interviewed elk hunters, read tea leaves and taught high school English. She earned her MFA at Sarah Lawrence College. She lives with her husband and daughter in Baltimore, where she is a visiting writer at American University.



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THIS ANNUAL COMPETITION, NAMED FOR MAY SWENSON, HONORS HER AS one of America's most provocative, insouciant, and vital poets. In John Hollander's words, she was "one of our few unquestionably major poets." During her long career, May was loved and praised by writers from virtually every major school of poetry. She left a legacy of nearly fifty years of writing when she died in 1989.

May Swenson lived most of her adult life in New York City, the center of poetry writing and publishing in her day. But she is buried in Logan, Utah, her birthplace and hometown.