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Where She Always Was

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May Swenson
POETRY AWARD SERIES

Where She Always Was

poems by
Frannie Lindsay

foreword by
J.D. McClatchy

WHERE SHE ALWAYS WAS

May Swenson
Poetry Award Series

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poems
by

Frannie Lindsay

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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For
Rosemary,
no matter what

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In memory of Katherine Hamilton Lindsay, 1907-1996.

FOREWORD

Back when, we were told to trust the tale, not the teller. More recently, we were informed that there are no authors, only texts willed into being by social and political circumstances. I don't think any passionate reader ever bought into that sort of poppycock. Not only does the writer–her ambitions, her background, her personality–fascinate us, but we know from experience what crucial perspectives onto her work this information offers us. There are two facts about Frannie Lindsay that I think are important to keep in mind as you read through this book: her age, and her music.

In a country where many poets have made belated debuts—Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens were near forty when their first books appeared—Lindsay is pushing things. She was born in 1949, and endured a familiar apprenticeship, graduating from the Iowa Writers' Workshop with an MFA in 1979, winning fellowships and going to writers' colonies, publishing in the Right Magazines. Then, in 1991, she stopped. She didn't just stop the hamster-wheel of a career, she stopped everything. Poets have, of course, stopped writing, some altogether, some for a decade or more, most famously Paul Valéry, before resuming again. And Lindsay too resumed. In 2001, poems began to occur to her, in a voice much different from that of her earlier work. When I asked her to describe the effect of this "second coming," she was feisty in her response: "At middle age, I no longer have time to relax into easy poetry. I'd rather craft truth and wind up with a good knot in my shoulders."

Notice the canniness when she says her aim is to *craft truth*, with its implication that the "truth" is made up. That attitude may also be an effect of age. As a poet, Lindsay was educated in a certain way: probably taught by the New Critical doctrines of the day to appreciate poetry's textures and ironies. Having been grounded in a set of expectations, she next witnessed during the decades since the Sixties a pageant of personalities and styles flash and fade. She was old enough to be both surprised and unimpressed. Confessionalism's lash, feminism's earnest agendas, po-mo hijinks—they have come and gone, and left in their wake many ruined poets who had swallowed one party line or another. Lindsay wisely kept herself above—and then for a long while helplessly apart from—the fray. As a result, her poems are resolutely unfashionable, the way the best poems always are. They count lucidity

and reserve among their virtues. They won't be forced into areas of experience deliberately outré or manic. When she writes of love—which is to say, of soured chances and small pleasures–she writes with a wisdom that charges her metaphors:

> What if I'd watched
> each time you grew almost lost,
> neither one of us trying?
>
> The rain turning to snow
> won't tell
> where the first flake forms
>
> its way through the downpour, avoiding
> shoulders, making its last
> slow choices.

Another virtue of age is its composure, and Lindsay's poems are alert as well to a rare sort of gentleness. It comes not from reticence but from understanding—as it was said of Tolstoy that he is the greatest of novelists because there was not a single human emotion that he did not know, understand, and sympathize with. Take her poem "Aging Nude." She considers a model and an artist, but her little moral parable has everything to do with the flesh, with mortality and the feelings it forces. Her instructions to the painter end this way:

> Think how little touches her
> already: gazes brushing past her
> like erasures. Don't make her young.
> Caress the stoop of shoulder, stomach,
> breast. Be exact in this.
>
> *Or drape her, and in that*
> *be tender.*

She asks for either truth or tenderness. That tenderness does not consist in lying but in covering up. Who looks on her erases, who drapes her discloses. Throughout her book, Lindsay has written poems of remarkable sympathy—not identifying herself with old dog or dying parent, but keeping her distance, the better to take the measure of another creature. James Baldwin once remarked astutely on the way writing can—is meant to, really—connect us: "It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or had

ever been alive." Lindsay's poems throw out just such life-lines: fine filaments meant to catch our emotions and bind them with hers.

During the decade she abandoned the writing of poems—or rather, that it abandoned her—she returned to music. She had grown up in a musical family (her mother, a concert violinist, appears over and over again in this book), and turned, as she had when young, to the rigors of practice. She bought a grand piano, and before long was concertizing—Mozart and Rachmaninoff were favorites. It is impossible, reading her poems, not to hear a musical hand at work. This is not just a matter of delicacy or virtuosity. It is also a matter of knowing how to phrase a line. Dizzy Gillespie once noted that "there are only so many notes, and how you get from one to another is what makes a style." Lindsay moves from detail to trope with utter poise, with an intuitive sense of what to sustain or emphasize. Her language is crisp. I can pick a stanza at random—

> chafed wrists. In come the bits of foam
> from his bitten and mended bed.
> In twitch the ragged dreams

—and praise its plosive energy, its modulated vowels, its variety and élan.

What age and music both teach is patience. That is not the hallmark of beginners, eager to make an impression. At its root, patience is an allowance—allowing things to happen, in their own shape, at their own pace; and allowing yourself to endure them, whether to see through them or to see them through. *Where She Always Was* allows us, in turn, the rare gratification of watching a poet—wonderfully accomplished, quietly persuasive—look back on a lifetime's worth of emotions and calculate their bearing on the present. In her craft is the truth. In our admiration is the lesson, and in that lesson is the further joy both of language with the concentration of prayer and of prayer as, in George Herbert's phrase, something understood.

J. D. McClatchy

WHERE SHE ALWAYS WAS

PART ONE

GATHERING HIM IN

The old dog is gathering
places to sleep. Into his callused paws
come the torn brocade drapes
I clean up with.

He is gathering in
the shoes, the stuffed bone and his
duck, and the real bones
under his own

chafed wrists. In come the bits of foam
from his bitten and mended bed.
In twitch the ragged dreams,

pacing a path,
matting the weeds
beneath his feet. And above them, stars

that leave no prints except
sand and salt we tracked after us. Tonight
I will bring all the snow into my arms

and build winter a dog
curled under the willow that keeps close
to its shade. Then I will carry him back

to where his window's warmth of sun,
left open a crack,
has been letting sleep in.

RAIN TURNING TO SNOW

How will I find you?

Blurring my breath against
the storm sash, I can't pretend not to
look for you,

while the rain gives its whole self away.

What if I'd watched
each time you grew almost lost,
neither one of us trying?

The rain turning to snow
won't tell
where that first flake forms

its way through the downpour, avoiding
shoulders, making its last
slow choices.

FERAL KITTENS

You have to be so patient.
(Following, not following.) Cradles
are traps. *(Wait here*

where street shoes change
without anything noticing,
and you can float

untorn over briar, stone: things
that have given up
listening.)

What took you this long?
Your pockets fallen
empty of kibble,
your trail of milk
gone sour,

while these three scrawny calicos
coil like cobras
(fending off sleep. Close
your eyes over them.)

MISSING

April has lost herself, torn the bark
off elbows and knots, dropped her blossoms
like pinned skirt hems. She isn't about to learn
from the snow-tossed crocus—a single bright mitten—
not from the ivy that clings too tight to climb
cunningly over the dormer
or the drenched knit cap
snagged on the bramble's bite.
Every dog sent out comes back one day too hungry,
but the sun has stopped on the mud-bruised face
of a girl who can prop herself up
almost long enough to beckon the wind
to brush her hair.

FOR NADJA

Tell me about your death.
Did it fold back the stiff wing
of your sheet, and help you
in, and lift your head, adjust
a few last things, a nurse
who knows this brisk routine?

Did you ask for ice chips,
a moment breathing
on your own?

When the shift changed,
was the drape thrown wide,
the gurney rinsed,
and set adrift?

Then did you sink
awake, leave behind
your non-skid blue foam slippers,
and swim

beneath the exit ramp,
the parking lot, the grid
of streets, with no belongings
but that single leaf of air?

Did you splash
back up at last, and shake
your soaked, fine hair,
and tread those first shallow hours
with astounding frailty?

GRADUAL CLEARING

Your once thick coat drifts and rips
little by little, tossing among
the limbs of lindens. Wind tugs
at its tails, its cuffs until one sleeve
tears free and turns into
a lean cat ready to spring, and then
a footprint. How close to here
is missing? What else
might pull the wrong thing home?
Our house is starting
to follow itself around: a ship bearing up
under sails fraying, the weight
of each bell chime filling the mist
with things you held
for as long as you could,
until they had finished
rising away.

LADYBUG

During the night she had clenched
between a field green and a crouton.
I brought her out of the fridge
stuck by a dot of parmesan dressing
upside down in limp salad; her tiny legs,
except the one flicking, lashed damp
against her ebony belly; her red saran wings
smeared shut. So when you came into the kitchen
thuddingly happy, wanting
to make our sandwiches, I had already
grazed her off of a corner of dry paper towel
onto the brick we used to wedge the window ajar
the day, despite wrenching storms,
that our love began to glide in
by itself. And I lay her there on the gritty clay
amazed by the science of tenderness, and
how, without harm, the sun stilled her.

TAKING OFF MY CROSS

I am so cautious, twisting apart
the male and female halves
of the barrel clasp. I know
you will not understand.

There is your shirt, a parachute
dropped from another buoyant
embrace. Here is our quilt,
and the dim cheek of light

on my breast. But this
is a rite of distance. I bare my neck
to only the evening heat;
to almond and oatmeal soap;

to the abiding and ignorant balm
of an old dog's breath.

KISS, AFTERWARD

Sometimes, afterward, when I still can't look
at my unlotioned legs or my belly
you've dried with our coarse green towel;

when my wrists still ache from priming
your blunt and loose-skinned cock that hurts me
with its dear perseverence; after I've come back to bed

from the bathroom; I catch myself
in the mirror I never let see me: its risk-strewn light,
and I want you

to grip me as hard as you can, to not be nice,
to force me to watch you
kiss my breast, to ground me from that

wince of lightning.

DOG, NAPPING

The breeze of his sleep is slow
these past weeks: the dead-leaf
twitch of his lids,

his mind drifting off as mine does
when I worry too much
to stroke his head.

Dust hugs the lime-green ball
stuck under the couch,
but for him, for now, all is toss and arc

and when I lie down beside him
to rest, his scrabbling legs kick my ribs.
And I see

he is happy, and I am the one
left weary from hoisting him up
every week on the scale at the vet's;

weary from prying his dank mouth
open for pills; from keeping him
close when he ambles away this simply

over a meadow he's coming to know.

HAPPINESS

Each day the dog forgets more of himself.
One sore tread past the cracked one before,
he doesn't mind his store-brand food,

stained bed, same smeared thought drifting over
the crest of his brain like a hand he has licked.
Tufted grey toys in a box:

death is death. Best, he likes tepid evenings,
now gimping a little alongside the park,
where children will not remember him.

MAGNOLIA

Off comes the modest part
of spring, the girl who grows
too fast, her gloves and anklets torn
on scant, young limbs.

Your gnarly grip has dropped
from my slouched breast, my hand,
veined now; my stiffened back.
How slowly I have gotten dressed,

yet this magnolia tree uncurls each fist
twice as reluctantly
these few chill nights
it lets the bright dark touch it.

RAPUNZEL DESCENDING

It takes twelve summers to build her
the treehouse, hammering each rung in its time

above the hot day dizziness, hauling the picture window
up by a risky gold pulley, gripping the nails in his teeth

like hairpins. He stashes each comb, each ribbon
deep in his overall pocket, until she is old

and can only bear to watch him
through the clear ceiling with the distant pity

of moonlight, wanting nothing of him
but the scissors he stole from her years ago

to snip the height from under them both,
and love her, lock by shorn lock, to the ground

for the rest of his shadeless life.

PART TWO

RESPECTS

I haven't been to my mother's vault
except to bring a handful of tense young roses
the street vendor gave me for free

the day we locked her heavy ashes in. But I know
how patient the sun on the Persian rug is there
from its years of lifting the pigments, and how

each sparrow outside the diamond-shaped window
knows his place, perched on a wrist
of bare forsythia, gazing into the crypt

with all his weight and not taking wing
when the first fatigued petals flare all the way back
long after I leave.

MOTHER'S GOLDFISH

My mother cannot remember
the end of the Great War, except,
as she tells us at dinner,
she had, in 1918,

two goldfish: King George
and the Kaiser, who died overfed
on soda crackers.

She brings her words to the surface
slowly, as if she had rolled up her frock sleeves
and cupped her small hands
in the cool of a prayer,

lifting two goldfish
out of her damask napkin to pass around
the table until the guest beside her

places them back in her glass bowl heart
with no words, no splash,
and we go on eating.

I LIKED MY MOTHER BEST

when she picked me up at the pond
after skating, her shy strength
flooding the wide vinyl seats of the Nash
with the scent of the winter day ending right there
on the tips of her pilled white mittens, with each
bosom full of her enduring breath: a sky iced
with the waiting of stars.

BAD DOG MAN

My father shoves the garage door
all the way up. It is 1956, he is home,
our new puppy has gone
to cower again behind the hassock.
She is teaching herself to curl
her vulva-like lips at the Bad Dog Man
who flips on the lights, who won't let us
sleep. In the bathroom,
our tile-cold bodies take turns
pressing against her. He won't let us
cling to her paddle-shaped ears
or her warm, ample scruff that morning
he slams her—snarling and innocent—
into the muggy crevice behind
the back seat, then roars the motor
that wakes us crying our heads off,
backs up to before we are born,
and screeches the red car away.

UNDERNEATH

Then I would spring from the pool's dark end,
kick as he showed me, and lock
my arms around his goosefleshy middle.

I touched it by accident: his nipple
pebbly under my stuttering thumb; I knew
what it was yet I rolled it between

the wrinkles even a young girl gets on her fingers
from playing too long in the water; and yes I knew
the twinge that dove from his chest

to the droop in his swim trunks
then rose, the head of a child who finally could
tread, up squinting and straining

like me, for air.

SATURDAY MORNINGS, 1954

Her nipples never hardened
when I jumped on top of her in bed and yanked
her nightshirt up and tugged them
with my baby teeth. I'd wake her up
with play-shouts: "Milk! Milk!"
and she would have to let me straddle her
birthworn belly with my pointy knees
until I hurt her, made her wince
with my tongue coiled from all the angry words
I couldn't know yet, words
I'd starve on, my tongue striking
at the unresponsive button of one breast
and then the other, blaming them
for every drop of blue-white food
her body might have made,
that might have made her
love me.

BY THE LAKE

I will not miss his soup sent back, untouched;
his metal tumbler by the sink, flat ice
in warming gin.

Nor will I mourn his knocking cough
imprisoned, nor his sweats. His wife's pilled afghan
is too dense for him these nights.

By the lake, he showed me
how to leap stones over water, call
a whippoorwill with flutter on our tongues

so she would answer.
Now wind with no voice left tosses bits of nest:
sticks and moss like children's curls

jerked tight, cropped short.

REMEMBERING STARS

I'd think his hands were breaking
so I'd come downstairs where he was
crying, bring my father
close, and set the gin down
on the breakfast table,

lay him on his study couch,
wrap him in his mother's
afghan, dim the lamp. Then I'd sit
on the stoop, my braids damp
with him.

SQUARE DANCE, 1956

August nights, dancers who barely knew how
—children like us—would clumsily ask
each other: the blinking tap
on the lake-cooled shoulder, the hurried curtsey,
because Pinky Johnson had finished twisting the pegs
of his cracked fiddle, paused the bow
over the gut strings, and
all the pavilion's ramshackle silence
had drawn the low, black beams
of its breath.

CELLO LESSONS

A fat Italian showed me how
to draw the bow: index finger
over the mother
of pearl dot, the others curled
across the frog

and then the curvature of wrist,
follow of elbow,
opening the slow wings
of my first note.

On Thursdays at six
we'd rosin up, tune, assemble
metal stands, adjust mine
low, sit down,
and start with easy Bach.
I was twelve, he seventy,
and brusque. And yet

when I knew just enough
he took my fingers
in his fleshy hand,
and spread them out

in thumb position,
difficult the first few times,
as if arranging the woman
I ached not to be
beneath a featherbed, and then
not touching her.

THE CORRECTION

When I got it wrong at school—missed
a word, could not recite
the long division tables—I would lock
my knees beneath my little plywood desk
in back where all the tall ones sat,
and sneak my uniform sleeve up
and bite down on my forearm, make myself
keep quiet, doing that, not
crying; gnashing hard with my gapped teeth
until the dotted "O" sunk in
because I couldn't hold my breath,
so had to clench my skin while no sobs flayed
my lungs: those lightless rooms
where loud girls kept themselves,
and stayed unsorry.

MIDAS ALONE

Everything I look at now becomes a blossom.
I wish unsimply that you know

how blind I am by sundown, each numb star
an ancient orchid.

I catch your breath amid the glistening
of insects; and in dusk that wants a father, almost

touch your cheek
the old, ungilded way God touched you.

I cannot bear to watch another petal sweep
the shoulder of the haggard, gleaming girl

who stoops above your grave.

VIGIL

Finally she lay with the sheets turned all the way back;
her wig gone, fever down; basking
in breezeless sleep

while he came every hour to turn her, to place his fingers
over the throat of her wrist as he'd been shown,
and listen hard

for the black wing-swish of her pulse:
a moth not flying, clinging
to light.

CHAGALL'S FLOATING WOMAN

Mostly she would doze, but keep
her shoes tied, waiting for him to come home.
He'd swoop her up:
her crinolines skimmed tin roofs, her pumps snagged
on willow tops. She was comic and robust;
he slight and tense, afraid she'd drop.

Now she's much too light for him, the midair girl
he's tired of painting: way too many
fiddles, goats, and props.
He ties her gown and guides her
to the john and back

against his thin, pocked arm. She dies
having lunch, while they are laughing.
She gags once
on her tepid soup.

He shuts their book,
the risqué, funny paperback they read aloud.
Sometimes, mid-paragraph, she'd nap
a minute, waxy nape against his shirt, and jerk
her arm straight up

as if to signal him
to set her down now; she had had enough.

PERSONAL EFFECTS

1

For once not arguing,
we divide among ourselves
the things she left: her mother's mother's
swan brooch, her pilled and odorless
brown coat, sturdy Timex,
the night shirt she mended
with clashing thread.

2

The morning before, I sat
by my mother's bed
to ask her what she would like
the paper to say about her
life. It was like being read a story
backwards, the reader becoming
the child afraid to fall asleep.

3

With the shift nurse helping
and some baby oil, and trembling
the way he did the day he slipped it on,
my father bends over
the quieted body I thought I saw breathe,
and slides off her wedding ring.

UNAFRAID

The doctor tells him to walk
five minutes a day, then ten, then all the way
to the letterbox. Instead he rests in
the leather chair his own father
wore the grain down on, no longer
rocking, not doing his stretches.

After his pills he arches
his knees up just till his hands can reach
to nick off his slippers,
turns his wife's favorite Dvořák louder,
sets down his glasses and rubs
the furrow of skin blurred red,

then flicks off
every light in the world
with his cane's blunt tip,
and journeys out.

MOTHER

On the way to your death,
I bought clothes.
Flat dresses on racks: *daughter,*
daughter, daughter, daughter.

I shopped for ways
you had thought
best of me: the brightest blacks,
the smallest sizes.

I chose, at last,
a stark tight number, and short.
One you would not
have approved of.

Next to the you
that was left,
I took your hand.

I was small enough
to fit in your drying heart,
curled up
in its chapped cold fist.

Mother, this
was *my* death. You weren't here
to choose me
a dress for it.

URN

Her brow and knees,
her brain

and womb and ruined heart,
her bowing arm,

and breasts that fed
no one, the foot that hurt,

the cheek
her father struck,

all burned
together: soot, light snow

the spring that she
was born.

PART THREE

COLD FRONT

On the days I can't love you
I still brush my legs over our bed's edge.
I thump my palms at the stuck window,
and hear back again to the mockingbird's fragments
of this and that; how he kept us
awake in the light of each other
until we were forced to follow his rumor exactly
to where he balanced, plump as a heart
on his strand of the power line:
bird who can fool me
mornings almost as sweet as those.

MIDAS's DAUGHTER AT FIFTY

Barefoot, I walk straight up to my father
on the golden lawn
and kiss him. All at once
the faint lights of the violets
burst back on. A mantis builds herself awake
from prickling twigs. The rain begins.
This is the world I meant to love.

Once he hoarded gems
in a cradle only he could rock,
and beat my heart with his clumsy hand.
Now I watch him tear his tarnished gloves off,
and shake out all the dread and blackened sweat
from his stiff wrists, and toss
his scared, new smile behind him.

AGING NUDE

She might vanish any second
into overalls and solid oxfords, leaving
pen strands, scrawls of hair,
anemone barrette unfastened.
Or she might stay, and shift her posture
when she tires.

Instructions: study form
by gesture. Keep the ink line
of the body limber: thirty seconds
without lifting nib from paper.

Think how little touches her
already: gazes brushing past her
like erasures. Don't make her young.
Caress the stoop of shoulder, stomach,
breast. Be exact in this.

Or drape her, and in that
be tender.

LINES ON A WINDOW

Start me
with a quick stroke:
slackened breast to lap
to knee then down
to knotted foot, and up
to nape. That fast
I could unravel back
into my drape, and then
my mended overalls
and anorak. I have
a bus to catch.
My body's late.
Think of all the gazes
whisking past me. Do not
lift your hand up
from the paper.
Do not make me young.

CINDERELLA AT WORK

I will grow old very suddenly, perhaps
while waltzing. Today I mopped
the scuff marks from the marble floor
and memorized more dance steps. Aging
is weeping less. I slept dry-eyed
through last night's party. I envision
ballrooms lit by zeal alone,
tricked stars sliding
in among the glazed white grapes.
And while I sleep and learn
and this sky rolls aside so slowly
that my sisters think it's wind,
the burlap curtain opens
on a jacquard sky. And I know
the whirring air is needles threading,
dress remnants being joined by hand.
And on the raveled outskirts
of the last kept acre
is a wish-worn, raspy voice
amid bright weeds.

THAW

I tried finding love for you
while winter offered us
false promises of snow.
Instead rain froze
the walks. My shoes soaked,
inching toward you. My hands
were always numb.

Januaries like these
the flesh deceives the heart:
ambitious sunlight weakens
the hard soil, unjustly pulling up
the buds of hyacinth.

We said harsh, polite goodbyes
in February: finally
cold enough to twist
forsythia back in.
Ice belongs on every twig.

And yet for the length
of this poem,
I invite you close again,
offhandedly, an off-shore
breeze, and only
for a moment, while it's warm.

Please come.
Please do not
take off your coat.

ANTIPHON

1

All the rain season my windows are portraits
of you finger streaks down steam
on those meds you can't cry

your name is my
expired address every letter comes back
crossed out a page from a diary
torn

by that urge of yours to wake up
amid things you can still break:
each faint, stupid star like a cheap teacup

and your cold sweat splinters of dew
in my courtyard
I can't sleep one second longer
your pen's on my pillow

2

on these meds I can't cry
so I streak my finger
down the steam on each window
draw portraits
name hurricanes
after the dolls I dressed and rocked
whose eyelids clicked all the way back

as for me, I look old
in the light of the things I have
to be kept from
my cold sweat is dew on weeds it isn't
dawn and they've come in
to change my clothes to watch
while I pray the toy-colored rosary

my pen's in their locker
the ink in it red beyond help

LIGHTERS AND KNIVES

for R. P.

You learned young:
the thin-skinned pass
over candles, singeing the tips
of shadows that tried to reach you.
You felt nothing, sang none
of the music too simple to scream
without thirty-three years of lessons
in holding your breath.

The votives don't quiver
under your finger. You steady the flames
and aim straight in
to the wicks. In blistering August,
you still hide
exacto stigmata beneath
long sleeves.

So many nights I've wrapped myself
in your barbed arms,
and held you the way I would
hold myself if I knew why
you keep each blade this hot, why
you nest them in such neat rows
until next time, then gently tighten
their velvet bows.

THE CLOTHESLINE PROJECT*

Thirty-five women tear off
their shirts. Now they can wash their bodies
back into the hot single bedroom at three
in the morning, the air from the alley
the moon avoided, the rank palm
clamped over the mouth, the six hours
it took trying to want to
live with each spent sinew,
the approximate height and the scrape
of the hair and the scar and the slant
of the laugh remembered
down to a raw valentine.

Thirty-five wide-awake
flags of the all-night sky
wave unabashed at noon, safe wings
grazing the shoulders
of women who without touching
help each other
get up, get dressed, stay dirty,
and write their names all over their clothes
in the blood of the husband, the father,
the other who keeps their breath
on the splinter of mirror
in his hip pocket.

Then again, underneath
on skin still tender: in the same brash red
of the roses that rage into bloom
even though someone still strips them
of every last thorn.

** The Clothesline Project pays tribute to survivors of sexual violence. Survivors and their loved ones write their stories on tee-shirts, different colors signifying different circumstances. These are displayed on a clothesline for one week in April.*

WHITE SHIRT

You lived
near the projects, five
months clean. You had Elena glint your hair
with strands of light pulled through a cap.
Your last Dollar Day alive
you bought two bright used dresses,
hung your whites out from your window early
since you'd worked three
night shifts in a row. Tears blew
from sheets, your son's tiny jockeys,
your best blouse. All you keep
beyond the drag and force
and unheard moan is this
bleached tee. White bleeds
from the weave: the slackened
grip, the soaring siren, and the stiff drape
laid across your face,
grit-smeared; and more grit beneath
your nails: twigs scraping,
breath frozen.

EVE IN EXILE

When God's hand helped me
break, I thought the pain would kill you.
We were never meant to heal, so
I am taking up the snapped wing
that you gave me then

to drop, disabled, back to where
the cave of your travail is deep
with dust, the garden's flowers brittle,
and it is blessed to remain
unready. Adam, my sister.

NOWHERE NEAR BETHLEHEM

Two thousand years from this dawn,
tell them not one faint grain of starlight
singled me out: this wind-burned pregnant girl
leaning into her donkey's neck
for heat. Tell them

nothing remained of the rugged mirage
God kept for us but bones of real teak
and wayward strands of hay
the wings of skittering angels left,
no matter what

the texts and the carols
throw in: the chorus of comfort,
the listening snow.

MAGDALENE BATHING

I dare not think of you,
yet from this riven cross
the deaths won't stop.
You were almost no one,

but each time we touched, a ring scar
showed up on my finger.
Now from the nail that aches above
the pumice stones and oils,

I drape my stained veil
from your stained hand. I squat down
sore and naked and alone
to be wept clean each starry morning.

SHOULD THIS BECOME ORDINARY

I barely remember the woman
too weak to go on
carrying her baby,

setting him down
in the trench of the burning road
to rest on the sleeve

wilted off her kimono, then
pressing his head
with one caked hand

against a twig of exposed rib
to feed
the last of the milk

her breast could send
to his patient, gray mouth.

OLD DOG

When he goes I will feel nothing
except for the dry blank rush

past my face, the ache
pressed black as the scab

on his wrist where the needle went in,
and his air hunger deep as a lake

where the sky sinks day after splashless day
until it is summer again, and night.

And the farthest star, the one that can't
sting the thinnest strand through space,

the one that keens to be named,
will be all I have to place—that alone—

on the blanket still thick with dander
and coarse white hair.

REMAINS

Before the dog died, the vet took away
eight of his teeth. I'd have kept
each one, had I known
how soon the rest of him would go.

I'd have made a box for them
of his empty ribcage: God's
hand unhinged, stroking a head.
I'd have kept them

on my dresser, where instead
he looks straight
at me: black and white
of a stilled lens. He doesn't like
being dead. It's hard work

being the strong cloud
that stays the same.
Hard for him, not making a sound
as ashes gust from my hands.

SILENT NIGHT

September 11, 2002

After the night had fallen, we floated,
unsignalled, out of our doors
alone, in twos and threes, with children
afraid to sleep; passing around
the one flame left.

Now we hover as close as that
to the same dim votive, cupped
in groups on library steps,

paper plates under our struggling
candles.

What can we use for stars
this year? The embers have settled.
What will come back
as our plain, dear stars?

Spent wicks: so warm, so near.

BLESSING AT THE END OF TIME

Right in the midst of the camels and carts of dry
sour cherries, a man is unrolling
his bristly prayer rug. A hand white as mine
is touching his shoulder.
Not one cloud has grazed
this village for weeks, yet in less than an hour
enemy fire will strike
his wife and newborn at home behind
sealed windows. He kneels before buying grain
for the bread she promised to make tonight
and prays for me.

PYRE

Hearing aid, pacemaker,
dentures. Before the burning,

these must be removed.
What swift, safe word

will I always, always long
to have yielded

when the first shy flame
touched my hand

like an asking child?

WHERE SHE ALWAYS WAS

Under the muslin shroud on my mother's
violin-playing chair is a lap
where marigolds never could grow, her last
attempt to stand up. The ladderback
creaks and fusses: she's flushed
from her day of trills and legato,

and now she tilts her sweaty red tumbler
of lemonade to her solemn lips. I kneel
before her big cracked feet
with their yellowy nails, and cool
her peeled arches with the rays of my hands.
I roll her bandage-thick hose up to her ankles
and help her on with her durable lace-up shoes.

I would stay—a daughter, a hanger-onner—
but evening is falling: its velour robe
across the upholstery. I would bring her
the newest dress she'd ever seen,
its sale tags fluttering,
its crinkled breeze of rayon

busied with marigolds. Then I would
tug the big sleeves over
the pleated flesh of her splendid elbows,
and press the unblossomed snap
against the trench of her throat.

BENEDICTION

Let children find my bones and marvel
to themselves at my once long, stern legs
that must have kicked my velvet skirt's pleat up,
and how the star I hid
beneath the whitened hair against my nape
is free, the pearl barrette unclasped; and let them guess
the way I looked at you: the glance
of each leaf back onto its linden branch; the dog back
in the sun's lap, merely sleeping; breath
behind its dearest kite; then paint,
wing-colored, on the brush again, and wet;
the sweet flush in the soul before
the poem, the kiss
back in your mind before
you knew me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frannie Lindsay's work has appeared most recently in *Field*, *Folio*, and *Salamander*. This volume also received Honorable Mention in the 2003 Benjamin Saltman Award at Red Hen Press.

Her earlier poems have also been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Antioch Review*, *College English*, *The Iowa Review*, *Yale Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *TriQuarterly*, *American Poetry Review* and others, including features in *Agni* and *Great River Review*. New work is forthcoming in *Spire*, *Tampa Review* and *Small Pond Magazine*.

Frannie has been awarded an NEA Literature Fellowship, and residencies at the MacDowell and Millay Colonies, and at Yaddo. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is a classical pianist who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her three retired greyhounds.

THE MAY SWENSON POETRY AWARD

This annual competition, named for May Swenson, honors her as one of America's most provocative and vital poets. In the words of John Hollander, 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 American poetry writing and publishing in her day. But she is buried in Logan, Utah, her birthplace and hometown.