Owl Question
Shearin, Faith

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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)