Owl Question
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Published by Utah State University Press

Shearin, Faith. 
Owl Question: Poems. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9332.

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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.