



LORE

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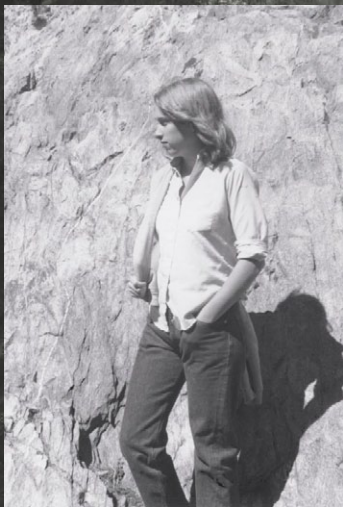


Self-Interview

by MEGAN
MARSHALL



*I don't
put
much
stock in
astrology,
but I still
feel that
my sign-
Gemini-
explains
a bit
about my
character.
I often feel
divided,
and I've
come to
enjoy
that.*



* Megan Marshall in California, 1975

The assignment to do a self-interview inspired me to put several sets of my twin selves in conversation.

*

California: I was born in Oakland, as were my mother and grandmother. How could I betray them by moving away? First my family settled in Pasadena, where I went to public schools K-12, absorbed the standard elementary school history curriculum—explorers, missionaries, wrote a report on a Latin American country, in my case Peru. But I chose Massachusetts for my state report—an omen? Now when I get back to California, about once a year, I feel powerfully that I'm home. The scent of eucalyptus, the gentler air, the brighter sun—I'm not sure what brings it on, but loss and betrayal (my own, of my past) are what I feel almost instantly after that first surprising, pleasurable moment of recognition. And then I pray I'll make it back to New England without falling victim to the killer earthquake we all know is coming.

New England: I've lived in New England since I came east for college in 1971, and in Massachusetts since 1974. I didn't think I'd stay after college, but then I met a man I later married who didn't think anything important happened in California, and on some level I must have agreed with him. My work has always been about New England. I still can't believe this place is so green, that there's abundant water in rivers and lakes and ponds almost everywhere you look. My office at Emerson College, where I teach, is right on the Boston Common—how lucky can a person be? But earthquakes can happen here too (my marriage ended in a messy divorce). New England rests on an enormous granite slab, and it wouldn't take much of a jiggle anywhere in the Northeast to topple all those beautiful brick Beacon Hill townhouses.

Bennington College (1971-1973): No grades, small classes, first-naming our professors, tiny green (fields) and white (clapboard dorms) campus. I'd always believed in "progressive" education, "free" schools, and later enjoyed researching and writing about some of the earliest ones in America, founded by the Peabody sisters and Bronson Alcott (Louisa's father). But I'd never attended one until I got to Bennington, which generously offered me an enormous need-based scholarship. I grew up at Bennington, learned about transcendentalism (my subject in both biographies) in a lit class taught by a poet, picked up a bit of East Coast savvy. But was I really a progressive?

Harvard College (1975-77): Transferred after eighteen months as a dropout, working odd jobs and writing poetry. Lit classes boring, for the most part, but poets galore! Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Fitzgerald, Jane Shore. These were my teachers in this supposedly stodgy place. Grew up some more here, and started to think of myself as a writer. Some day.

Musician: Practiced the piano or harpsichord almost every day, sometimes for many hours a day, every year from age six to age twenty-two. Learned to listen to myself objectively, learned to calm nerves before concerts. Enjoyed most of it, loved playing chamber music, hated playing from memory.

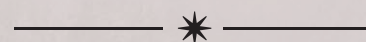
Writer: Not so different—practice hard for hours every day. Attempt to read my own writing objectively, and over-and-over obsessively, to be sure it sings. Listen for the melody in my subjects’ voices, support them in my narrative. A biographer is like a good accompanist.

Summer: Perhaps I only dimly recall my summer self—the one that spent vacations in a one-room mountain cabin, my family of five crowded in and spilling out for long days of high-altitude hiking, picnicking, swimming in ice-cold lake water. Sleeping outside every night under the stars. But then there were the many seasons I enrolled in six-week summer school sessions, first because my mom worked, then because the financially strapped school district cut one class period from the regular school day and I had to meet science requirements for college. I still work almost year round, and don’t get much vacation, living on memories of Sierra Nevada summers. I will get back.

Winter: Snow—still a wonder to me. I don’t mind shoveling the driveway and front steps. I’m clever about the icebound weeks in January and February, strapping spikes to my boots when I walk the dog. I bought an all-wheel drive car a few years ago, so I’m no longer afraid to venture out in a storm if I have to, although I still avoid driving on snow. I learned to ice skate, and though I can only skate forward rather stiffly, I love being out on the ice and feel proud of my later-life accomplishment. I work harder in the winter, and that’s good too. Hot weather makes me nervous and claustrophobic, but I refuse to install an air conditioner. Instead I use a trick Annie Dillard taught me—roll up an ice cube in a kerchief and tie it around your neck, letting the ice melt against your skin. It works—winter in summer!

Asleep: I almost never dream about my subjects, but once I dreamed I was touring the grounds of the high school in Pasadena where the Rose Parade floats used to park at the end of New Year’s Day, a kind of carnival atmosphere. I walked up to a fortune teller’s booth and found Ralph Waldo Emerson sitting there—I could ask him any question I wanted. (Often people say to me, if you could speak to your long-dead subject and ask any question you wanted, what would it be?) I woke up. Last night I dreamed I was in a friend’s elaborately decorated apartment, and noticed that she had a scale model of Elizabeth Bishop’s living room set up on a display table. (Bishop is my current subject.) I started to pick up some of the doll-house sized furniture—a fancy piano, a brocade sofa—thinking I’d take them back home with me to use in my writing. My friend wouldn’t notice—or would she? I tried putting them back, but they wouldn’t fit!

Awake: Much better. Best of all when I wake up with sentences already forming in my head and I can get to the writing as soon as I’ve . . . walked the dog, eaten breakfast, read the paper. No, skip all that (except walking the dog) and start writing!



MEGAN MARSHALL is the author of *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*, winner of the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in biography, and *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*, winner of the Francis Parkman Prize, the Mark Lynton History Prize, and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2006. Both books won the Massachusetts Book Award in nonfiction.