

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

November 6, 2017

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *A Light Left On*

In the evening we came back  
Into our yellow room,  
For a moment taken aback  
To find the light left on,  
Falling on silent flowers,  
Table, book, empty chair  
While we had gone elsewhere,  
Had been away for hours.

When we came home together  
We found the inside weather.  
All of our love unended  
The quiet light demanded,  
And we gave, in a look  
At yellow walls and open book.  
The deepest world we share  
And do not talk about  
But have to have, was there,  
And by that light found out.

May Sarton<sup>1</sup>

## Reflections

May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude* might be one of the most formative books I've read for the way it has shaped my own poetic sensibility. It encapsulates in prose—prose that is lush and true and beautiful—what the best of her poems probe: in Sarton's words, “the sacramentalization of the ordinary.”

Often, in writing these reflections, I am made aware of the nearness—if not the *sameness*—of poetry and prayer. In *Journal of a Solitude*, Sarton describes better, or at least more precisely, what I mean: “If one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud, something like revelation takes place. Something is ‘given’ and perhaps that something is always a reality outside the self. We

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<sup>1</sup> “A Light Left On” by May Sarton from *Collected Poems, 1930-1993*. W. W. Norton. Used by permission.

are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in the negative sense of denying self, but in the sense of losing self in admiration and joy.”

Most of her work is concerned with this kind of attention, a hyper-awareness of both exterior and interior landscapes. And the poem printed here, in particular, manages to illustrate both: it’s an outward observation that leads to some internal recognition. There is a gentleness to its tone, reflective of the soft light of “inside weather,” “yellow walls and open book.” We’ve all experienced something like this: coming home to find one room still lit, an unexpected welcome, or at least a reminder that the world continued even when (we thought) we were absent from it.

One reason I admire the poem is that it communicates a great deal by its leaving a lot out. I find myself reading and rereading the lines, “The deepest world we share / And do not talk about / But have to have, was there / and by that light found out” and I wonder how Sarton is somehow able to include me, this outside reader, in a world to which I did not think I belonged; I feel invited into an intimate room, a part of the “inside weather” as though I too had simply “gone elsewhere.”

What is this “deepest world”? Can it be named, or described, or replicated? How can I explain this world that does not require talking about, but rather needing to have? A world that has been right where it is supposed to have been—untouched, softly lit—though I did not always recognize it? Does this not sound like prayer? It echoes those experiences of having found something that’s been with us all along, or of recognizing love in a place it has always been present, knowing God when we did not know to call God, God.

It is by “that light”—at once an ordinary and also a miraculous light—that we see anew. Just as those things hidden in darkness do not stop existing simply because we cannot see them, neither do things suddenly exist simply because we notice them. The ordinary does indeed become sacramental this way; in *beholding* beauty, in recognizing holiness on earth, we ourselves become the vessels *of* that beauty.

### ✠ About the Poet

May Sarton (1912-1995) is the pen name of Eleanore Marie Sarton, an American poet, novelist and memoirist, born in Belgium. She lived there until German troops invaded; then, she and her parents fled to England and later to Boston. Though her poems and novels were met with much acclaim, she is best known for her journals and memoirs, particularly *Journal of a Solitude*, an honest account of her solitary life in which she writes about aging, friendship, love, gratitude, lesbianism, nature, and spirituality. “A Light Left On” was written for her partner of many years, Judy Matlack.



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