

Classic Poetry Series

May Swenson
- poems -

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May Swenson(May 28, 1913 – December 4, 1989)

Anna Thilda May "May" Swenson (May 28, 1913 in Logan, Utah – December 4, 1989 in Bethany Beach, Delaware) was an American poet and playwright. She is considered one of the most important and original poets of the 20th century, as often hailed by the noted critic Harold Bloom.

The first child of Margaret and Dan Arthur Swenson, she grew up as the eldest of 10 children in a Mormon household where Swedish was spoken regularly and English was a second language. Much of her later poetry works were devoted to children (e.g. the collection *Iconographs*, 1970). She also translated the work of contemporary Swedish poets, including the selected poems of Tomas Tranströmer.

Personal Life

Swenson attended Utah State University in Logan in the class of 1934, where she received a bachelor's degree. She taught poetry at as poet-in-residence at Bryn Mawr, the University of North Carolina, the University of California at Riverside, Purdue University and Utah State University. From 1959 to 1966 she worked as an editor at New Directions publishers. Swenson left New Directions Press in 1966 in an effort to focus completely on her own writing. She also served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1980 until her death in 1989.

In 1936 Swenson worked as an editor and ghostwriter for a man called "Plat," who became her boyfriend. "I think I should like to have a son by Plat," she wrote in her diary, "but I would not like to be married to any man, but only be myself."

Her poems were published in *Antaeus*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Carleton Miscellany*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Saturday Review*, *Parnassus* and *Poetry*. Her poem *Question* was also published in Stephenie Meyer's book *The Host*.

Awards and recognition

She received much recognition for her work. Some of which include:

American Introductions Prize in 1955;

William Rose Benet Prize of the Poetry Society of America in 1959;

Longview Foundation Award in 1959;

National Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1960;

Brandeis University Creative Arts Award in 1967;

Lucy Martin Donnelly Award of Bryn Mawr College in 1968;

Shelley Poetry Award in 1968

Guggenheim fellowship in 1959,

Amy Lowell Traveling Scholarship in 1960,

Ford Foundation grant in 1964

Bollingen Prize for poetry in 1981,

MacArthur Fellowship in 1987.

7 Days On The Sea

Monday

The world is a ball of water.
See, it is round-sided.
I move across its topside,
upon the world, not in it.
The boat is a comb, a comb over idle
white hair.
Waves grow on a round skull
uncountable.
Sea, it is round-sided.
Fog is building a vessel.
Sea is the butt of a bottle.
Boat bobs in the center.
At the V
of the stern standing,
I see below me sea,
ceiling of fog, see
the round horizon, sea
tears on my cheeks. I see
through globes of tears
the last lost point of land.
The world all
of water below and a low
sky. The world is a ball
of water. Pendulum-sun
goes over slow.
All night out riding
beside the mast
the moon posts in the sky.

Tuesday

Aggressor prow. Agree-er sea.
In flocs of marble vanish veins of foam
all morning. In the afternoon
the quarry-ocean starboard hisses, lashes into cracks.
Concussive blocks slip roaring aft.
A double thunder smacks the boat's drum-side.
Steep tents of wind and spray are pitched

on buckling, heckling water.
Papooseed under blankets, prammed in a yellow chair
on a grid of calked wide planks
that rush in long perspective to the rail,
I see a corner of the deck rise up
to roof over angled waves, and duck,
a hatch-lid closing below my eyelid's thatch.
Ramping, the paving sea romps, lifts, lets itself down,
rises, ramps and, romping, side-slips, lets itself down,
a floor that never stills and flats,
that never levels steady.
We dine behind steel ribs: a riveted whale,
white-bellied, bluntly breaks through acres of quartz,
bores a corridor with wedged head
in heavy, innocent, black, abundant water.
Portholes, gill-holes, jug-shaped, fill with sky
the purple whale-sheen drains away
fill with foam and freeze-greendrains away
fill with liquid sky, with solid sea, that drains away.
Oh, will it ever pause at half and half
so the soup can stop, can stop being sly in the bowls?

Wednesday

A slag-pile slipping, parting, shifting
black under ashes of cloud.
Smoke or snow blows off the square, the axe-blade waves:
A Nova Scotian color, the morning cold and April.
By noon blue tables with plentiful plates of foam.
Crisp napery of gulls unfolds aloft.

The wild side's portside after dark.
Ghost hogans rise on a plane of coal
in the mica of moonlight.
Houris, eeries, valkyries, furies,
sybils, satyrs, weirds and bards
orate, whistle, screech, scratch, scrabble,
snarl, quarrel, quibble in the rigging.
Trolls, trout, ghouls, geese and gargling walri
snort, sneer, chortle, sniggle, chuckle in the scuppers.
I stand at the rail of a wooden pen

all alone on the windy, dark, warped, harpy sea.
he moon gashing a cloud, slants up, slants down.
The moon is posting tonight.

Thursday

Today, on the round horizon, rain in the east,
opposite a great gold sheepshead cloud.
I, in the portside lee of the fantale, found
the ladder of seven colors upsloped on the sea,
delicate-ribbed, quite short, a belt to the sky,
low-linking milky waves to a gray-scud dome:
Violet, Green, Yellow, Rose, and pallors in between.
All round, all large and round, the plattered sea.
All curved, all low and curved, the lid of light.
The white duck of the boat an only lump on the sea.
I, there, could not see me,
but who stared from the stair of the rainbow could see.
Tonight I lie on a shelf, the cabin dark,
the bunk floats in the purring ship on the panting sea.
I-Eye open, level with the porthole, see
in miniature, round-framed, captured, the round sea:
like a rushing sky of blue-black foaming clouds
racing counter to the boator like engines of infinity
pulsing a summer heaven full-speed by.
Or the hole is a planet turning, star-spray dashed
before its face as it travels the orbit's rail.
Or that white scud is its restless atmosphere.
Or it is a moon whose white volcanoes steam
such fluvia across its somber carapace.
The ship leans slippery sideways. My cradle rocks.
A rough wide white lash rears up, smacking the glass.
Atomic, bombastic water blasts, obliterates
the porthole's iris. The cabin quakes.

Friday

Eye out running
on soft flints
on the pathless sea.
White-lipped near-stones
now ganged close to the boat.

A circular pasture
raked and cleared today
of wraths and rips,
snowy jags and cones.
I on the quarter deck
in-rolled in my chair,
infant or invalid set to cure
or spoil in the sun,
I run behind my outrunning eye
to toe every wave
that skips to the thin horizon,
every colt-blue wave
and its cobalt shadow . . .
Orange anchor-sun
steadies my chair.
Deck builds a foothill,
sea a gulf, and stern,
a great hip, leaps
on wind-free air.

I look for, what do I look for on the unfurnished sea?
On land I longed for a large place empty.
Eye-I avoided obstacles, vehicles, people, shapes intercepted.
Eye-I wished to veer out far, long, wide, high, unframed, uninterrupted
but like a thrown stone bumped, stopped, stumbled into buildings.
Now no upright, only the permanent low-fleeing waves
the sparse and insubstantial, transient clouds . . .
Which white loller afar might be a boat?
Or porpoise, or even a swimming man
naked, living on wave as gull on air?
Which dark dollop might be nose of a whale?
Or wooden joist from a down-gone ship?
Or even a seated man, ebony, shining
Sea-Buddha, rigid, afloat, with ivory grin? . . .
Only the waves perpetual, only the unpeopled sea.

Saturday

There on the round rim east,
on the compass curve,
the ship the sextant's center,
there on the lead-thin line

I see a mark!
Growing square, approaching.
A hut? Oh, it is a boat,
a twin-ship sailing to meeting.
Trundling, tossing, tipping,
persisting, coming on.
Expanding, rounding tubbish,
towing a wide wake.
Cross-barred masts for and aft
stab her solid to the sea.
Yellow and green, her plump
stack issues energy.
Our sister passes, she
is our mirror on the wave.
How like a painted boot
(with doll-arms waving from decks!)
In full-hooped splashing skirts
she bobs on, opposite bound.
We wave all our arms.
Our toot salutes her toot.
So soon she littles and fades,
graying to a hut
of mist in the shape of a square.
And sharpens to a mark
on the empty map of the west.
And teeters on the edge
of horizon, and rolls off. . .
a period fallen from the font.

Sunday

Land. Yes, Ho! A mist-made coast,
a strand of Ireland sighted off the bow.
Fast Net Rock, admonitory tower,
the lighthouse rising dour on a fist of stone:
Cobh comes forward quiescent to greet
the float of the boat.
How mat-mild now the tantrum sea
lured to the cove.
How flat and old the world,
and odd and still,
when upcropped the horizon halts

the willful eye,
shows it its stall and pasture
safe and small.
All sibilant little laps the boat glides on,
its lunge arrested.
A great heart has stopped.
A silent sled is whitely, mournfully borne
to the gray land's shed.
I, in the prow, here, hear my pulse again,
feel equal feet on the steady deck.
Fence of the rail nears fence of the dock.
The door to the wild is closing.
With hanging neck
I watch that crack far down
the world around
and world not round
through sliding tears.

May Swenson

Analysis Of Baseball

It's about
the ball,
the bat,
and the mitt.

Ball hits
bat, or it
hits mitt.

Bat doesn't
hit ball, bat
meets it.

Ball bounces
off bat, flies
air, or thuds
ground (dud)
or it
fits mitt.

Bat waits
for ball
to mate.

Ball hates
to take bat's
bait. Ball
flirts, bat's
late, don't
keep the date.

Ball goes in
(thwack) to mitt,
and goes out
(thwack) back
to mitt.

Ball fits
mitt, but
not all
the time.
Sometimes
ball gets hit

(pow) when bat
meets it,
and sails
to a place
where mitt
has to quit
in disgrace.
That's about
the bases
loaded,
about 40,000
fans exploded.

It's about
the ball,
the bat,
the mitt,
the bases
and the fans.
It's done
on a diamond,
and for fun.
It's about
home, and it's
about run.

May Swenson

Bleeding

Stop bleeding said the knife
I would if I could said the cut.
Stop bleeding you make me messy with the blood.
I'm sorry said the cut.
Stop or I will sink in farther said the knife.
Don't said the cut.
The knife did not say it couldn't help it but
it sank in farther.
If only you didn't bleed said the knife I wouldn't
have to do this.
I know said the cut I bleed too easily I hate
that I can't help it I wish I were a knife like
you and didn't have to bleed.
Well meanwhile stop bleeding will you said the knife.
Yes you are a mess and sinking in deeper said the cut I
will have to stop.
Have you stopped by now said the knife.
I've almost stopped I think.
Why must you bleed in the first place said the knife.
For the same reason maybe that you must do what you
must do said the cut.
I can't stand bleeding said the knife and sank in farther.
I hate it too said the cut I know it isn't you it's
me you're lucky to be a knife you ought to be glad about that.
Too many cuts around said the knife they're
messy I don't know how they stand themselves.
They don't said the cut.
You're bleeding again.
No I've stopped said the cut see you are coming out now the
blood is drying it will rub off you'll be shiny again and clean.
If only cuts wouldn't bleed so much said the knife coming
out a little.
But then knives might become dull said the cut.
Aren't you still bleeding a little said the knife.
I hope not said the cut.
I feel you are just a little.
Maybe just a little but I can stop now.
I feel a little wetness still said the knife sinking in a
little but then coming out a little.

Just a little maybe just enough said the cut.
That's enough now stop now do you feel better now said the knife.
I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut.
I don't I don't have to feel said the knife drying now
becoming shiny.

May Swenson

Blue

Blue, but you are Rose, too,
and buttermilk, but with blood
dots showing through.
A little salty your white
nape ing hairs
shoot back of your ears' Rose
that tongues like to feel
the maze of, slip into the funnel,
tell a thunder-whisper to.
When I kiss, your eyes' straight
lashes down crisp go like doll's
blond d iris Roses,
your lids uncloseto Blue-ringed
targets, their dark sheen-spokes
almost green.I sink in Blue-
black Rose-heart holes until you
lips, the serrate
folds taste smooth, and Rosehip-
round, the center bud I suck.
I milknip your two Blue-skeined
blown Rose beauties, too, to sniff
their berries' blood, up stiff
pink 're white in
patches, only mostly Rose,
buckskin and saltly, speckled
like a sky.I love your spots,
your white neck, Rose, your hair's
wild straw splash, silk spools
for your where white
spouts out, spills on your brow
to clear eyepools, wheel shafts
of light, Rose, you are Blue.

May Swenson

Cardinal Ideograms

A mouth. Can blow or breathe,
be a funnel, or Hello.

A grass blade or a cut.

A question seated. And a proud
bird's neck.

Shallow mitten for two-fingered hand.

Three-cornered hut
on one stilt. Sometimes built
so the roof gapes.

A policeman. Polite.
Wearing visored cap.

O unrolling,
tape of ambiguous length
on which is written the mystery
of everything curly.

A step,
detached from its stair.

The universe in diagram:
A cosmic hourglass.
(Note enigmatic shape,
absence of any value of origin,
how end overlaps beginning.)
Unknotted like a shoelace
and whipped back and forth,
can serve as a model of time.

Lorgnette for the right eye.
In England or if you are Alice
the stem is on the left.

A grass blade or a cut

companied by a mouth.
Open? Open. Shut? Shut.

May Swenson

Feel Like A Bird

Feel like A Bird
understand
he has no hand

instead A Wing
close-lapped
mysterious thing

in sleeveless coat
he halves The Air
skipping there
like water-licked boat

lands on star-toes
finger-beak in
feather-pocket
finds no coin

in neat head like
seeds in A Quartered
Apple eyes join
sniping at opposites
stereoscope The Scene
Before

close to floor giddy
no arms to fling
A Third Sail
spreads for calm
his tail

hand better
than A Wing?
to gather A Heap
to count
to clasp A Mate?

or leap
lone-free and mount

on muffled shoulders
to span A Fate?

May Swenson

Feel Me

"Feel me to do right," our father said on his deathbed.
We did not quite know—in fact, not at all—what he meant.
His last whisper was spent as through a slot in a wall.
He left us a key, but how did it fit? "Feel me
to do right." Did it mean that, though he died, he would be felt
through some aperture, or by some unseen instrument
our dad just then had come to know? So, to do right always,
we need but feel his spirit? Or was it merely his apology
for dying? "Feel that I do right in not trying,
as you insist, to stay on your side. There is the wide
gateway and the splendid tower, and you implore me
to wait here, with the worms!"

Had he defined his terms, and could we discriminate
among his motives, we might have found out how to "do right"
before we died—supposing he felt he suddenly knew
what dying was. "You do wrong because you do not feel
as I do now" was maybe the sense. "Feel me, and emulate
my state, for I am becoming less dense—I am feeling right
for the first time." And then the vessel burst,
and we were kneeling around an emptiness.

We cannot feel our father now. His power courses through us,
yes, but he—the chest and cheek, the foot and palm,
the mouth of oracle—is calm. And we still seek
his meaning. "Feel me," he said, and emphasized that word.
Should we have heard it as a plea for a caress—
a constant caress, since flesh to flesh was all that we
could do right if we would bless him?
The dying must feel the pressure of that question—
lying flat, turning cold from brow to heel—the hot
cowards there above protesting their love, and saying,
"What can we do? Are you all right?" While the wall opens
and the blue night pours through. "What can we do?
We want to do what's right."

“Lie down with me, and hold me, tight. Touch me. Be with me. Feel with me. Feel me to do right.”

May Swenson

Fountains Of Aix

Beards of water
some of them have.
Others are blowing whistles of water.
Faces astonished that constant water
jumps from their mouths.
Jaws of lions are snarling water
through green teeth over chins of moss.
Dolphins toss jets of water
from open snouts
to an upper theater of water.
Children are riding swans and water
coils from the S-shaped necks and spills
in flat foils from pincer bills.
A solemn curly-headed bull
puts out a swollen tongue of water.
Cupids naked are making water
into a font that never is full.
A goddess is driving a chariot through water.
Her reins and whips are tight white water.
Bronze hoofs of horses wrangle with water.
Marble faces half hidden in leaves.
Faces whose hair is leaves and grapes
of stone are peering from living leaves.
Faces with mossy lips unlocked
always uttering water,
water
wearing their features blank
their ears deaf, their eyes mad
or patient or blind or astonished at water
always uttered out of their mouths.

May Swenson

Kiwi

Fruit without a stone, its shiny
pulp is clear green. Inside, tiny
black microdot seeds. Skin
the color of khakiImagine
a shaggy brown-green pelt
that feels like felt.
It's oval, full-rounded, kind
of egg-shaped. The rind
comes off in strips
when peeled with the lips.
If ripe, full of juice,
melon-sweet, yet tart as goose-
berry almost. A translucent ring
of seed dots looks something
like a coin-slice of banana. Grown
in the tropics, some stone
fruits, overlarge, are queerly
formed. A slablike pit nearly
fills the mango. I
scrape the fibrous pulp off with my
teeth. That slick round ball
in avocado (fruit without juice) we call
alligator pear:
Plant this seedpit with care
on three toothpicks over a glass
of water. It can come to pass
in time, that you'll see
an entire avocado tree.
Some fruits have stones, some seeds.
Papaya's loaded with slimy black beads.
Some seem seedlesslike quince
(that makes your tastebuds wince.)
Persimmon will
be sour, astringent 'until
dead ripe,' they say. Behind
pomegranate's leathery rind,
is a sackful of moist rubies. Pear,
cantaloupe, grapefruit, guava keep their
seeds hidden, as do raspberry, strawberry,

pineapple. Plum, peach and cherry
we know as fruits with big
seedstones. And fig?
Its graininess is seed. Hard to believe
is prickly durian. It's custard
sweetand smells nasty.
But there's no fruit as tasty,
as odd, or as funny
none
as fresh-off-the-vine New Zea-
land kiwi.

May Swenson

Landing On The Moon

When in the mask of night there shone that cut,
we were riddled. A probe reached down
and stroked some nerve in us,
as if the glint from a wizard's eye, of silver,
slanted out of the mask of the unknown-
pit of riddles, the scratch-marked sky.

When, albino bowl on cloth of jet,
it spilled its virile rays,
our eyes enlarged, our blood reared with the waves.
We craved its secret, but unreachable
it held away from us, chilly and frail.
Distance kept it magnate. Enigma made it white.

When we learned to read it with our rod,
reflected light revealed
a lead mirror, a bruised shield
seamed with scars and shadow-soiled.
A half faced sycophant, its glitter borrowed,
rode around our throne.

On the moon there shines earth light
as moonlight shines upon th earth...
If on its obsidian we set our weightless foot,
and sniff no wind, and lick no rain
and feel no gauze between us and the Fire
will we trot its grassless skull, sick for the homelike shade?

Naked to the earth-beam we shall be,
who have arrived to map an apparition,
who walk upon the forehead of a myth.
Can flesh rub with symbol? If our ball
be iron, and not light, our earliest wish
eclipses. Dare we land upon a dream?

May Swenson

Little Lion Face

Little lion face
I stopped to pick
among the mass of thick
succulent blooms, the twice

streaked flanges of your silk
sunwheel relaxed in wide
dilation, I brought inside,
placed in a

of your shaggy stem
sticky on my fingers, and
your barbs hooked to my hand,
sudden stings from them

were I'm bold
to touch your swollen neck,
put careful lips to slick
petals, snuff up gold

pollen in your navel cup.
Still fresh before night
I leave you, dawn's appetite
to renew our glide and suck.

An hour ahead of sun
I come to find 're
twisted shut as a burr,
neck drooped unconscious,

an inert, limp bundle,
a furled cocoon, your
sun-streaked aureole
eclipsed and dun.

Strange feral flower asleep
with flame-ruff wilted,
all magic halted,
a drink I pour, steep

in the glass for your
undulant stem to suck.
Oh, lift your young neck,
open and expand to your

lover, hot light.
Gold corona, widen to sky.
I hold you lion in my eye
sunup until night.

May Swenson

Motherhood

She sat on a shelf,
her breasts two bellies
on her poked-out belly,
on which the navel looked
like a sucked-in mouth—
her knees bent and apart,
her long left arm raised,
with the large hand knuckled
to a bar in the ceiling—
her right hand clamping
the skinny infant to her chest—
its round, pale, new,
soft muzzle hunting
in the brown hair for a nipple,
its splayed, tiny hand picking
at her naked, dirty ear.
Twisting its little neck,
with tortured, ecstatic eyes
the size of lentils, it looked
into her severe, close-set,
solemn eyes, that beneath bald
eyelids glared—dull lights
in sockets of leather.

She twitched some chin-hairs,
with pain or pleasure,
as the baby-mouth found and
yanked at her nipple;
its pink-nailed, jointless
fingers, wandering her face,
tangled in the tufts
of her cliffy brows.
She brought her big
hand down from the bar
with pretended exasperation
unfastened the little hand,
and locked it within her palm—
while her right hand

with snag-nailed forefinger
and short, sharp thumb, raked
the new orange hair
of the infant's skinny flank—
and found a louse,
which she lipped, and
thoughtfully crisped
between broad teeth.
She wrinkled appreciative
nostrils which, without a nose,
stood open—damp holes
above the poke of her mouth.

She licked her lips, flicked
her leather eyelids—
then, suddenly flung
up both arms and grabbed
the bars overhead.
The baby's scrabbly fingers
instantly caught the hair—
as if there were metal rings there—
in her long, stretched armpits.
And, as she stately swung,
and then proudly, more swiftly
slung herself from corner
to corner of her cell—
arms longer than her round
body, short knees bent—
her little wild-haired,
poke-mouthed infant hung,
like some sort of trophy,
or decoration, or shaggy medal—
shaped like herself—but new,
clean, soft and shining
on her chest.

May Swenson

October

1

A smudge for the horizon
that, on a clear day, shows
the hard edge of hills and
buildings on the other coast.
Anchored boats all head one way:
north, where the wind comes from.
You can see the storm inflating
out of the west. A dark hole
in gray cloud twirls, widens,
while white rips multiply
on the water far out.
Wet tousled yellow leaves,
thick on the slate terrace.
The jay's hoarse cry. He's
stumbling in the air,
too soaked to fly.

2

Knuckles of the rain
on the roof,
chuckles into the drain-
pipe, spatters on
the leaves that litter
the grass. Melancholy
morning, the tide full
in the bay, an overflowing
bowl. At least, no wind,
no roughness in the sky,
its gray face bedraggled
by its tears.

3

Peeling a pear, I remember
my daddy's hand. His thumb
(the one that got nipped by the saw,
lacked a nail) fit into

the cored hollow of the slippery
half his knife skinned so neatly.
Dad would pare the fruit from our
orchard in the fall, while Mother
boiled the jars, prepared for
"putting up." Dad used to darn
our socks when we were small,
and cut our hair and toenails.
Sunday mornings, in pajamas, we'd
take turns in his lap. He'd help
bathe us sometimes. Dad could do
anything. He built our dining table,
chairs, the buffet, the bay window
seat, my little desk of cherry wood
where I wrote my first poems. That
day at the shop, splitting panel
boards on the electric saw (oh, I
can hear the screech of it now,
the whirling blade that sliced
my daddy's thumb, he received the mark
that, long after, in his coffin,
distinguished his skilled hand.

4

I sit with braided fingers
and closed eyes
in a span of late sunlight.
The spokes are closing.
It is fall: warm milk of light,
though from an aging breast.
I do not mean to pray.
The posture for thanks or
supplication is the same
as for weariness or relief.
But I am glad for the luck
of light. Surely it is godly,
that it makes all things
begin, and appear, and become
actual to each other.
Light that's sucked into
the eye, warming the brain

with wires of color.
Light that hatched life
out of the cold egg of earth.

5

Dark wild honey, the lion's
eye color, you brought home
from a country store.
Tastes of the work of shaggy
bees on strong weeds,
their midsummer bloom.
My brain's electric circuit
glows, like the lion's iris
that, concentrated, vibrates
while seeming not to move.
Thick transparent amber
you brought home,
the sweet that burns.

6

"The very hairs of your head
are numbered," said the words
in my head, as the haircutter
snipped and cut, my round head
a newel poked out of the tent
top's slippery sheet, while my
hairs' straight rays rained
down, making pattern on the neat
vacant cosmos of my lap. And
maybe it was those tiny flies,
phantoms of my aging eyes, seen
out of the sides floating (that,
when you turn to find them
full face, always dissolve) but
I saw, I think, minuscule,
marked in clearest ink, Hairs
#9001 and #9002 fall, the cut-off
ends streaking little comets,
till they tumbled to confuse
with all the others in their

fizzled heaps, in canyons of my
lap. And what keeps asking
in my head now that, brushed off
and finished, I'm walking
in the street, is how can those
numbers remain all the way through,
and all along the length of every
hair, and even before each one
is grown, apparently, through
my scalp? For, if the hairs of my
head are numbered, it means
no more and no less of them
have ever, or will ever be.
In my head, now cool and light,
thoughts, phantom white flies,
take a fling: This discovery
can apply to everything.

7

Now and then, a red leaf riding
the slow flow of gray water.
From the bridge, see far into
the woods, now that limbs are bare,
ground thick-littered. See,
along the scarcely gliding stream,
the blanched, diminished, ragged
swamp and woods the sun still
spills into. Stand still, stare
hard into bramble and tangle,
past leaning broken trunks,
sprawled roots exposed. Will
something move?—some vision
come to outline? Yes, there—
deep in—a dark bird hangs
in the thicket, stretches a wing.
Reversing his perch, he says one
“Chuck.” His shoulder-patch
that should be red looks gray.
This old redwing has decided to
stay, this year, not join the
strenuous migration. Better here,

in the familiar, to fade.

May Swenson

Question

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen

Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount
all eager and quick
How will I know
in thicket ahead
is danger or treasure
when Body my good
bright dog is dead

How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye

With cloud for shift
how will I hide?

May Swenson

Sleeping With Boa

I show her how to put her arms around me,
but she's much too small.

What's worse, she doesn't understand.

And

although she lies beside me, sticking
out her tongue, it's herself she licks.

She likes my stroking hand.

And

even lets me kiss.

But at my demand:

"Now, do it to me, like this,"

she backs off with a hiss.

What's in her little mind?

Jumping off the bed,

she shows me her behind,

but curls up on the rug instead.

I beg her to return. At first, she did,

then went and hid

under the covers. She's playing with my feet!

"Oh, Boa, come back. Be sweet,

Lie against me here where I'm nice and warm.

Settle down. Don't claw, don't bite.

Stay with me tonight."

Seeming to consent, she gives a little whine.

Her deep, deep pupils meet mine

with a look that holds a flood ...

But not my brand.

Not at all.

And,

what's worse, she's much too small.

Staying At Ed's Place

I like being in your apartment, and not disturbing anything.
As in the woods I wouldn't want to move a tree,
or change the play of sun and shadow on the ground.

The yellow kitchen stool belongs right there
against white plaster. I haven't used your purple towel
because I like the accidental cleft of shade you left in it.

At your small six-sided table, covered with mysterious
dents in the wood like a dartboard, I drink my coffee
from your brown mug. I look into the clearing

of your high front room, where sunlight slopes through bare
window squares. Your Afghanistan hammock,
a man-sized cocoon
slung from wall to wall, your narrow desk and typewriter

are the only furniture. Each morning your light from the east
douses me where, with folded legs, I sit in your meadow,
a casual spread of brilliant carpets. Like a cat or dog

I take a roll, then, stretched out flat
in the center of color and pattern, I listen
to the remote growl of trucks over cobbles on
Bethune Street below.

When I open my eyes I discover the peaceful blank
of the ceiling. Its old paint-layered surface is moonwhite
and trackless, like the Sea—of Tranquillity.

May Swenson

Strawberrying

My hands are murder-red. Many a plump head
drops on the heap in the basket. Or, ripe
to bursting, they might be hearts, matching
the blackbirds's wing-fleck. Gripped to a reed
he shrieks his ko-ka-ree in the next field.
He's left his peck in some juicy cheeks, when
at first blush and mostly white, they showed
streaks of sweetness to the marauder.

We're picking near the shore, the morning
sunny, a slight wind moving rough-veined leaves
our hands rumple among. Fingers find by feel
the ready fruit in clusters. Here and there,
their squishy wounds....Flesh was perfect
yesterday....June was for gorging....
sweet hearts young and firm before decay.

'Take only the biggest and not too ripe,'
a mother calls to her girl and boy, barefoot
in the furrows. 'Don't step on any. Don't
change rows. Don't eat too many.' Mesmerized
by the largesse, the children squat and pull
and pick handfuls of rich scarlets, half
for the baskets, half for avid mouths.
Soon, whole faces are stained.

A crop this big begs for plunder. Ripeness
wants to be ravished, as udders of cow when hard,
the blue-veined bags distended, ache to be stripped.
Hunkered in mud between the rows, sun burning
the backs of our necks, we grope for, and rip loose
soft nipples heads. If they bleed—too soft—
let them stay. Let them rot in the heat.

When, hidden away in a damp hollow under moldy
leaves, I come upon a clump of heart-shapes
once red, now spiderspit-gray, intact but empty,
still attached to their dead stems—
families smothered as at Pompeii—I rise

and stretch. I eat one more big ripe lopped
head. Red-handed, I leave the field.

May Swenson

That The Soul May Wax Plump

My dumpy little mother on the undertaker's slab
had a mannequin's grace. From chin to foot
the sheet outlined her, thin and tall. Her face
uptilted, bloodless, smooth, had a long smile.
Her head rested on a block under her nape,
her neck was long, her hair waved, upswept. But later,
at "the viewing," sunk in the casket in pink tulle,
an expensive present that might spoil, dressed
in Eden's green apron, organdy bonnet on,
she shrank, grew short again, and yellow. Who
put the gold-rimmed glasses on her shut face, who
laid her left hand with the wedding ring on
her stomach that really didn't seem to be there
under the fake lace?

Mother's work before she died was self-purification,
a regimen of near starvation, to be worthy to go
to Our Father, Whom she confused (or, more aptly, fused)
with our father, in Heaven long since. She believed
in evacuation, an often and fierce purgation,
meant to teach the body to be hollow, that the soul
may wax plump. At the moment of her death, the wind
rushed out from all her pipes at once. Throat and rectum
sang together, a galvanic spasm, hiss of ecstasy.
Then, a flat collapse. Legs and arms flung wide,
like that female Spanish saint slung by the ankles
to a cross, her mouth stayed open in a dark O. So,
her vigorous soul whizzed free. On the undertaker's slab, she
lay youthful, cool, triumphant, with a long smile.

May Swenson

The James Bond Movie

The popcorn is greasy, and I forgot to bring a Kleenex.
A pill that's a bomb inside the stomach of a man inside

The Embassy blows up. Eructations of flame, luxurious
cauliflowers giganticize into motion. The entire 29-ft.

screen is orange, is crackling flesh and brick bursting,
blackening, smithereened. I unwrap a Dentyne and, while

jouncing my teeth in rubber tongue-smarting clove, try
with the 2-inch-wide paper to blot butter off my fingers.

A bubble-bath, room-sized, in which 14 girls, delectable
and sexless, twist-topped Creamy Freezes (their blond,

red, brown, pinkish, lavender or silver wiglets all
screwed that high, and varnished), scrub-tickle a lone

male, whose chest has just the right amount and distribu-
tion of curly hair. He's nervously pretending to defend

his modesty. His crotch, below the waterline, is also
below the frame—but unsubmerged all 28 slick foamy boobs.

Their makeup fails to let the girls look naked. Caterpil-
lar lashes, black and thick, lush lips glossed pink like

the gum I pop and chew, contact lenses on the eyes that are
mostly blue, they're nose-perfect replicas of each other.

I've got most of the grease off and onto this little square
of paper. I'm folding it now, making creases with my nails.

May Swenson

The Lowering

The flag is folded
lengthwise, and lengthwise again,
folding toward the open edge,
so that the union of stars on the blue
field remains outward in full view;
a triangular folding is then begun
at the striped end,
by bringing the corner of the folded edge
to the open edge;
the outer point, turned inward along the open edge,
forms the next triangular fold:
the folding continued so, until the end is reached,
the final corner tucked between
the folds of the blue union,
the form of the folded flag is found to resemble that
of a 3-cornered pouch, or thick cocked hat.

Take this flag, John Glenn, instead of a friend;
instead of a brother, Edward Kennedy, take this flag;
instead of a father, Joe Kennedy, take this flag;
this flag instead of a husband, Ethel Kennedy, take this flag;
this 9-times-folded red-white-striped, star-spotted-blue flag,
tucked and pocketed neatly,
Nation, instead of a leader, take this folded flag.
Robert Kennedy, coffin without coverlet,
beside this hole in the grass,
beside your brother, John Kennedy,
in the grass,
take, instead of a country,
this folded flag;
Robert Kennedy, take this
hole in the grass.

May Swenson

The Shape Of Death

What does love look like? We know
the shape of death. Death is a cloud
immense and awesome. At first a lid
is lifted from the eye of light:
there is a clap of sound, a white blossom

belches from the jaw of fright,
a pillared cloud churns from white to gray
like a monstrous brain that bursts and burns,
then turns sickly black, spilling away,
filling the whole sky with ashes of dread;

thickly it wraps, between the clean sea
and the moon, the earth's green head.
Trapped in its cocoon, its choking breath
we know the shape of death:
Death is a cloud.

What does love look like?
Is it a particle, a star -
invisible entirely, beyond the microscope and Palomar?
A dimension unimagined, past the length of hope?
Is it a climate far and fair that we shall never dare

discover? What is its color, and its alchemy?
Is it a jewel in the earth-can it be dug?
Or dredged from the sea? Can it be bought?
Can it be sown and harvested?
Is it a shy beast to be caught?

Death is a cloud,
immense, a clap of sound.
Love is little and not loud.
It nests within each cell, and it
cannot be split.

It is a ray, a seed, a note, a word,
a secret motion of our air and blood.
It is not alien, it is near-

our very skin-
a sheath to keep us pure of fear.

May Swenson

The Tall Figures Of Giacometti

We move by means of our mud bumps.
We bubble as do the dead but more slowly.

The products of excruciating purges
we are squeezed out thin hard and dry.

If we exude a stench it is petrified sainthood.
Our feet are large crude fused together

solid like anvils. Ugly as truth is ugly
we are meant to stand upright a long time

and shudder without motion
under the scintillating pins of light

that dart between our bodies
of pimped mud and your eyes.

May Swenson

The Woods At Night

The binocular owl,
fastened to a limb
like a lantern
all night long,

sees where all
the other birds sleep:
towhee under leaves,
titmouse deep

in a twighouse,
sapsucker gripped
to a knothole lip,
redwing in the reeds,

swallow in the willow,
flicker in the oak -
but cannot see poor
whippoorwill

under the hill
in deadbrush nest,
who's awake, too -
with stricken eye

flayed by the moon
her brindled breast
repeats, repeats, repeats its plea
for cruelty.

May Swenson

Water Picture

In the pond in the park
all things are doubled:
Long buildings hang and
wriggle gently. Chimneys
are bent legs bouncing
on clouds below. A flag
wags like a fishhook
down there in the sky.

The arched stone bridge
is an eye, with underlid
in the water. In its lens
dip crinkled heads with hats
that don't fall off. Dogs go by,
barking on their backs.
A baby, taken to feed the
ducks, dangles upside-down,
a pink balloon for a buoy.

Treetops deploy a haze of
cherry bloom for roots,
where birds coast belly-up
in the glass bowl of a hill;
from its bottom a bunch
of peanut-munching children
is suspended by their
sneakers, waveringly.

A swan, with twin necks
forming the figure 3,
steers between two dimpled
towers doubled. Fondly
hissing, she kisses herself,
and all the scene is troubled:
water-windows splinter,
tree-limbs tangle, the bridge
folds like a fan.

May Swenson

Women

Women Or they
should be should be
pedestals little horses
moving those wooden
pedestals sweet
moving oldfashioned
to the painted
motions rocking
of men horses

the gladdest things in the toyroom

The feelingly
pegs and then
of their unfeelingly
ears To be
so familiar joyfully
and dear ridden
to the trusting rockingly
fists ridden until
To be chafed the restored

egos dismount and the legs stride away

Immobile willing
sweetlipped to be set
sturdy into motion
and smiling Women
women should be
should always pedestals
be waiting to men

May Swenson