

POETRY

May Swenson

Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht

In his introduction to the October 1947 issue of the English literary magazine *Horizon*, Cyril Connolly remarked on the evanescence of literary celebrity in America, the fleetingness of reputations, commenting that “the crucial factor is the high cost of book production which renders the printing of small editions (under 10,000) uneconomic; the tendency is therefore to go all out for the best sellers and, with a constant eye on Hollywood, to spend immense sums on publicity to bring about one of those jack-pots. . . . The American public are cajoled into reading the book of the month, and only the book of the month—and for that month only. Last year’s book is as unfashionable as last year’s car. . . . Last year’s authors are pushed aside.” If that was true in 1947, it is even truer today, and if it was (and is) true of fiction, what must it mean for the comparatively marginal authorship and readership of poetry? The poetic giants (Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens) excepted, as well as those such as T. S. Eliot, who have retained a curiously scandalous claim upon continuing attention, most poets upon their deaths disappear into fogbanks of oblivion, occasionally to be rediscovered as novelties (like H. D. or Mina Loy) by some enterprising historian. Who now reads Mary Aldis, Walter Conrad Arensberg, Skipwith Cannell, Arthur Davison Ficke? Or Charles Mackey, William Mickle, or even Samuel Rogers, the richest poet of his day, who the *Encyclopædia Britannica* asserts “played the part of literary dictator in England over a long period”?

Must the same be said of May Swenson (1913–89)? She is one of America’s finest modernist poets. She can be perfectly traditional when she chooses, but she delights in writing experimental poetry, aiming for the unexpected and the surprising, not infrequently with an eye to securing important visual effects. In this she belongs to an elect coterie of writers that would include e. e. cummings and Guillaume Apollinaire, though it can boast an ancestry tracing itself as far back as the Hellenistic poets Simias and Dosiadas, and would include such 17th-century-style poems as George Herbert’s “Easter Wings.” As for Apollinaire, he wrote a poem in the shape of the Eiffel Tower, and another in which the letters and words stream downward in irregular lines in a work called “*Il Pleut*.” This typographical dexterity can be found as well in the work of John Hollander (see his volume called *Types of Shape*) and in some of the surrealists, as well as in poems by Kenneth Patchen. Yet it should not be surprising to find poets with an active interest in the immediate visual aspect of writing and typefaces. William Blake was a printer and etcher as well as a publisher and poet; William Morris was a poet as well as a publisher and designer of texts, fabrics, tiles, and wallpaper.

May Swenson was born in Logan, Utah, into a Mormon family. After graduating from the Utah State University, she moved to New York City

and worked with the Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. She served as an editor of the avant-garde New Directions Press for 10 years beginning in 1956, after which she held a series of visiting professorships at various colleges and universities throughout the country, including Bryn Mawr, the University of North Carolina, the University of California (Riverside), Purdue, and Utah State. Her many honors include membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and fellowships from the Guggenheim, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations. In the course of time she managed, between teaching appointments, to travel widely and imaginatively, as the titles of some of her poems suggest: "Above the Arno," "Notes Made in the Piazza San Marco," "The Pantheon, Rome," "Italian Sampler," "Camping in Madera Canyon," and "'So Long' to the Moon from the Men of Apollo." She was a student and friend of Elizabeth Bishop, from whose example she developed a singularly accurate eye and a gently modulated sense of humor, along with an appreciation of what may be thought of as (to vary a Freudian locution) the surrealism of everyday life. Viewed in retrospect, her work seems more and more original and richly rewarding.

The Engagement

When snow	cross
a wing	to where
is folded	I flow
over everything	in the rainbow
when night	seek me
a net	in the rock
dips us	break
in forget	that lock
when blue	meet me
my eye	in the wheel
leaks into	your thread
a sky	I'll feel
and floss	I'll come
your skin	to where you sink
is what the	in the tiger's
spiders spin	blink
when stone	and catch you
our veins	in the fish
are parted	with my strenuous
chains	wish
when prism	Find me
sun	in the flake
bends us	I will
one from one	wake

The Lightning

The lightning waked me. It slid under
my eyelid. A black book flipped open
to an illuminated page. Then instantly
shut. Words of destiny were being ut-
tered in the distance. If only I could
make them out! . . . Next day, as I lay
in the sun, a symbol for conceiving the
universe was scratched on my eyeball.
But quickly its point eclipsed, and
softened, in the scabbard of my brain.

My cat speaks one word: Four vowels
and a consonant. He receives with the
hairs of his body the whispers of the
stars. The kinglet speaks by flashing
into view a ruby feather on his head.
He is held by a thread to the eye of
the sun and cannot fall into error.
Any flower is a perfect ear, or else it
is a thousand lips . . . When will I grope
clear of the entrails of intellect?




Stone Gullets

Stone gullets among Inrush Feed Backsuck and
The boulders swallow Outburst Huge engorgements Swallow
In gulps the sea Tide crams jagged Smacks snorts chuckups Follow
In urgent thirst Jaws the hollow Insurge Hollow
Gushing evacuations follow Jetty it must Outpush Greed

Of Rounds

MOON
round
goes around while going around a
round
EARTH
EARTH
round
with MOON
round
going around while going around
goes around while going around a
round
SUN
SUN
round
with EARTH
round
with MOON
round
going around while going
around, and MERCURY
round
and VENUS
round
going around while
going around, and MARS
round
with two MOONS
round
round
going around
while going around, and JUPITER
round
with fourteen MOONS
round
round
round
round
round
round
round
round
round
round
round
round
round
round
round

going around while going around, and SATURN
 round
 with ten
 MOONS
 round
 round
 round
 round
 round
 round
 round
 round
 round
 round
 going around while going around, and URANUS
 round
 with five MOONS
 round
 round
 round
 round
 round
 going around while going around, and NEPTUNE
 round
 with two MOONS
 round
 round
 going around while going around, and
 PLUTO
 round
 going around while going around, goes around while
 going around
 A  OF ROUNDS
 Round

Out of the Sea, Early

A bloody
egg yolk. A burnt hole
spreading in a sheet. An en-
raged rose threatening to bloom.
A furnace hatchway opening, roaring.
A globular bladder filling with immense
juice. I start to scream. A red hydrocephalic
head is born, teetering on the stump of
its neck. When it separates, it leaks rasp-
berry from the horizon down the wide esca-
lator. The cold blue boiling waves cannot
scour out that band, that broadens, slid-
ing toward me up the wet sand slope. The
fox-hair grows, grows thicker on the
upfloating head. By six o'clock,
diffused to ordinary gold,
it exposes each silk thread and rumple in the carpet.



Night Practice

I
will
remember
with my breath
to make a mountain,
with my sucked-in breath
a valley, with my pushed-out
breath a mountain. I will make
a valley wider than the whisper, I
will make a higher mountain than the cry;
will with my will breathe a mountain, I will
with my will breathe a valley. I will push out
a mountain, suck in a valley, deeper than the shout
YOU MUST DIE, harder, heavier, sharper a mountain than
the truth YOU MUST DIE. I will remember. My breath will
make a mountain. My will will remember to will. I, suck-
ing, pushing, I will breathe a valley, I will breathe a mountain.

F
I
R
E
ISLAND

The Milky Way
above, the milky
waves beside,
when the sand is night
the sea is galaxy.
The unseparate stars
mark a twining coast
with phosphorescent
surf
in the black sky's trough.
Perhaps we walk on black
star ash, and watch
the milks of light foam forward, swish and spill
while other watchers, out
walking in their white
great
swerve,
gather
our
low
spark,
our little Way
the dark
glitter
in
their
s
i
g
h
t
.



Geometrid

Writhes, rides down
on his own spit,
lets breeze twist

him so he chins,
humps, reels up it,
munching back

the vomit string.
Some drools
round his neck.

Arched into a staple
now, high on green
oak leaf he punctures

for food, what
was the point
of his act? Not

to spangle the air,
or show me his trick.
Breeze broke

his suck,
so he spit
a fraction of self's

length forth, bled
colorless from within,
to catch a balance,

glide to a knot
made with his own mouth.
Ruminant

while climbing, got
back better than bitten
leaf. Breeze

that threw
him snagged him
to a new.

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