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## Body My House

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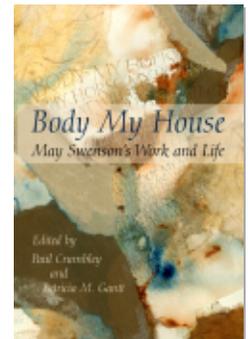
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# THE LOVE POEMS AND LETTERS OF MAY SWENSON

R. R. Knudson

I am a fan of May Swenson's poetry. *A fan*. She's my favorite poet of many I dote on and I will tell you why right up front. I love her authentic voice, her instinctual feelings, her keenness of perception, her amazing variety of subjects, her cosmos both accessible and elusive. I love that she stayed away from poetry fashions of her time, that her poems can't be crammed into a category, that she founded no movement and has no disciples, that she won a devoted audience without being in the academy or any other establishment, that she was a popular success earning a modest living by writing: publishing in magazines, finding publishing houses and admiring editors for her collections, and making her way into dozens, then hundreds, now thousands of others' collections: for example, she appears in textbooks designed for students from kindergarten through graduate school *and* their teachers; anthologies of poems for general readers; recipe books, medical books, how-to and self-help books; and prefaces and epigraphs for novels. Her poems have been set to music by more than fifty contemporary composers.<sup>1</sup> I know these songs; I know the radio broadcasts and TV scripts; I know the baseball programs, the calendar captions, the greeting cards, and other reprints, because I have, since May's death, granted these rights on her poems.

I am the owner of more than nine hundred poems and prose pieces that May thought of as her children. Few weeks pass without requests for "Analysis of Baseball," "Bleeding," "Cat and the Weather," "The Cloud Mobile," "The Centaur," "Feel Me," "Forest," "How Everything Happens,"

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1. This list is derived from critical articles about May, from reviews of her books, and from conversations with May about her work.

“How to Be Old,” “The James Bond Movie,” “July 4<sup>th</sup>,” “God’s | Children,” “The Key to Everything,” “Living Tenderly,” “Mornings Innocent,” “The Pregnant Dream,” “Snow in New York,” “Southbound on the Freeway,” “The Surface,” “To Make a Play,” “The Universe,” “Women,” “Working on Wall Street,” to name some of her most oft-printed poems. Numerous others are active, and I’m astonished by the selections. For example, not long ago at Carnegie Hall I heard Marilyn Horne sing a setting of May’s “Digital Wonder Watch” by the composer William Bolcom.

As May writes in “By Morning,” there is “Something for everyone / plenty / and more coming.”

In the last fourteen years, I have overseen the publication of more than one hundred poems that May left unpublished in the folders she had titled “Working.” When editors such as Peter Davison, Sandy McClatchy, Grace Schulman, and Herb Liebowitz have asked me for “something by May,” I’ve read poems from these folders at random and chosen those that I liked and that seemed to make Swenson sense, even if unfinished. I’ve placed many other “Working” poems in the six Swenson collections published since 1991 and in the two Swenson biographies I’ve written. Then, this past winter, I gathered all of the remaining unpublished drafts, bound Xerox copies of them in Kinko blue, and sent the originals to the Swenson archive at Washington University: 250 more children of hers.

May loved to write. She seemed happiest with a pencil in her hand. One of the first letters May Swenson wrote to me, dated April 4, 1967, was a draft of her poem “Wednesday at the Waldorf.” It followed a visit we’d made to an aquarium in Brooklyn and later to breakfast at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

Two white whales have been installed at  
the Waldorf. They are tumbling slowly  
above the tables, butting the chandeliers,  
submerging, and taking soft bites  
out of the red-vested waiters in the  
Peacock Room. They are poking *fleur-de-llys*  
tails into the long pockets on the  
waiters’ thighs. They are stealing  
breakfast strawberries from two eccentric  
guests—one, skunk-cabbage green with  
dark peepers—the other, wild rose and  
milkweed, barelegged, in Lafayette loafers.  
When the two guests enter the elevator,

the whales ascend, bouncing, through all  
the ceilings, to the sixth floor. They  
get between the sheets. There they turn  
candy-pink, with sky-colored eyes, and  
silver bubbles start to rise from velvet  
navels on the tops of their own heads.  
Later, a pale blue VW, running on poetry,  
weaves down Park Avenue, past yellow  
sprouts of forsythia, which, due to dog-do  
and dew, are doing nicely. The two  
white whales have the blue car in tow  
on a swaying chain of bubbles. They are  
rising toward the heliport on the Pan Am  
roof. There they go, dirigible and slow,  
hide-swiping each other, lily tails flipping,  
their square velvet snouts stitched with  
snug smiles. It is April. "There's  
a kind of a hush all over the world."

At the end of this letter, May added, "Imagine reading this poem in the *New Yorker* not knowing anything about it. . . . It's not done yet—but almost. If it's no good, tell me, and never mind."

May sent me other poems in letters over the years. Most of these have been published, except this about a household chore:

What could be dumber  
Than waiting for the plumber  
Why doesn't he call, at least  
He's got my nummer?

And this limerick, when I'd complained in a letter to her about menstrual cramps:

After grunts and groans myriad  
a period was placed by *my* period.  
I'm glad that it was  
simply because  
of this nuisance I had become wearied.

And this, which May titled "Poems with Plot and Action," because I'd noted that her poems lacked a story line (at that time I was under the spell of Tennyson):

Once there was someone named Zan  
always ended what she began  
She could cook but not sew  
and ski like a pro . . .  
she was both Babe & Tarzan . . .

I won't go on for the next twenty-four lines of extolment, still with no plot.

Tarzan aside, as well as the poems you will encounter in *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*, the dearest loves of May's life were elsewhere, loves that are the deepest roots of her creative vision. The taproot was her parents. Their letters to May and hers to them are filled with caring: "Darling daughter May," a usual opening, "with love, admiration, and appreciation," or "Lots of love from your old dad," their closings.

Her mother writes from Logan: "I have thought of you continually while reading your new book and in my prayers daily. Congratulations to you, my famous daughter." And from Sweden: "I arrived here in my hometown where I was born 75 years ago. What a surprise. I got your letter. It made me so happy." May answered her mother with these words: "Thank you for your sweet and wonderful letters. I long to see your handwriting. I love you so much." In another letter May sent her mother this poem, which her mother published in *The Relief Society Magazine* of the Mormon Church:

### Her Hands

The hands that set wisdom into books,  
Or capture beauty with a brush  
Are not so eloquent by far  
As a mother's fingers are.

For it is wonderful to think  
Her hands must leave their work  
Of wash and cook and mend for ten,  
To get the ink and hunt the pen. . . .

The hands that still the babe to sleep,  
That knead the bread, that turn the seam,  
That rest at night upon the quilt  
The wedding ring agleam;

The hands so veined and creased with toil,  
Now raised in joy, now clenched in fear,

Now shadowing the eyes to pray—  
These hands took up the pen today

And wrote “Dear Daughter” on a page.  
That made a masterpiece of love,  
More memorial, more supreme,  
Than any artist’s dream.

And this thank-you letter for a book May’s mother sent to her:

I am going to read your book ‘Introduction to the Gospel,’ Mother. In Chapter 1, I like the definition of “humility.” It’s one I agree with: “an attitude of open-mindedness, a childlike curiosity about things, a search for knowledge and understanding”—in other words, “Don’t feel you already know everything. . . .” And if there is a basic and eternal truth, it is . . . [here:] “Love”—which “is the great principle of life, the first commandment—the heart of all religion and life.” I certainly agree [with that]. The love that was planted in me by my parents ever since my birth—even before birth—and which continued to be exemplified by you and Dad, generously spread among us brothers and sisters, and which is now passed on in a widening stream to your children’s children, is a powerful . . . and protective force. I do realize my great luck in being born to you and Dad, in receiving such a legacy.

May’s letters to her father seem to me to be especially luscious with love and respect. Here, she strives flat out to explain herself. Dropping her characteristic masks and her craft in favor of some studied prose, she writes, in 1951:

I’m sending you a copy of a poetry magazine that just came out, with a poem of mine in it—you may have seen this one in manuscript, but here it is in print. I often wonder and have doubts about whether what I write has any significance for you. I don’t imagine it does—for your life is so full and active that you have no need for the playthings of art. Your creative urge is spent directly in living—in shaping people through your influence, in cultivating growing things—not in trying to capture sensations through the medium of art. The word “art” is contained in the word “artificial,”

the opposite of natural. Well, it is that—it is a sort of opposite of life—a sort of rebellion against life perhaps, or an attempt to control or equal it with a synthetic creation of one's own, rather than riding with life, giving in to it, immersing oneself in it, and resigning oneself to being but a particle in a process. Art grows out of individual arrogance, I suppose. Here I am admitting it's questionable.

Another letter dated 1951 is just as revealing:

Dad, I expect you sometimes wonder about me and perhaps feel pain at the fact that I seem “outside the fold”—not only in that I have spent so many years at a distance from home, but that my beliefs and attitudes seem different from most of the rest of the family. I want to point to the fact that this seeming separation, or opposition, is actually not the case—that, in fact, it proves my likeness to you and mother and my comparison with you (at least psychologically)—for just as you and mother were not content with inherited knowledge and belief, with the traditional way of life of your parents and ancestors and felt the need to find a new faith and even a new land for yourselves, I had this same impulse. It is a healthy impulse—it is really the evolutionary impulse itself at its root, which accounts for all progress (for decay as well, perhaps)—let us say, for *change*, which is the dynamics of life. I do not know whether I am making a big circle with my life (I hope it is not a zero!) simply in order to arrive, in the end, where I started—but even if this turns out to be the case the journey would not be entirely foolish because every sensitive human being is confronted with the necessity of learning by himself, of discovering through experience, and is simply incapable of taking his course in life for granted as pointed out by parents or others in authority—just as there are many human beings, more docile, who are incapable of taking any other course than that recommended by the majority around them.

Well, I didn't mean to get on like this, and it sounds like some kind of defense, but it is just the impulse to talk things over with you that I get quite often but usually squelch for fear of being misconstrued, or at other times because I decide it isn't necessary—you have faith in me and love and trust me, as I do you.

Years later May sent her dad a poem, left unpublished, that's just as direct. She says, "Dear Dad, I'm always with you in my thoughts and I wrote this poem about me and you. I hope it can convey a little of what you mean to me."

The Seed of My Father

I rode on his shoulder. He showed me the moon.  
He told me its name with a kiss in my ear.  
"My moon," I said. "Yours," he agreed.  
And as we walked, it followed us home.

Holding my hand, he showed me a tree,  
and picked a peach, and let me hold it.  
I took a bite, then he took a bite.  
"Ours?" I asked. "Yes, our tree."  
Then with a hoe he made the water flow beside it.

.....  
He made a garden, and he planted me.  
Sun and moon he named and deeded to me.  
Water and fire he created, created me,  
he named me into being: I am the seed of my father.

His breath he gave me, he gave me night and day.  
His universe is in me fashioned from his clay.  
I feed on the juice of the peach from his eternal tree.  
Each poem I plant is a seedling from that tree.  
I plant the seed of my father.

Her love for her parents—what could be more obvious? Born into a family impervious to hate, nourished from day one by a father's connection to natural things and by a mother whose optimistic spirit and ardor for Mormon Gospel touched every daily act, May grew to write with romantic energy spread over her entire universe of suns, moons, planets, seasons, water, fire, gardens, animals—and, yes, friends, editors, and even other poets.

And here are some examples from her unpublished poems.

Oblong Afternoons

I would make with paint  
and set in a frame

the oblong afternoons of summer  
in the stupefying weather

I would lay thick with scalpel  
how apple boughs float  
foundering skiffs  
in moody orchards

Waxen apple sheen  
poplar sheen  
dark sheen of asphalt  
I'd make a suave brush

In obtuse sky  
how the sun is fat  
I'd stab an ochre dob [sic]  
and in the porches  
of square spinning houses  
fix a deep blue shock of shade  
[1934]

He

[also called "Lord Sun"]

Came back one day in the fall  
We thought he'd gone for good  
to the old man's home of winter  
the clouds had hung so long  
like gray beards in the sky

The squirrel had prepared for cold  
the crow for snow with his scolding cry  
and we had prepared for dark  
to fall early on the park  
with the shutting of summer's gate  
prepared the proxy log for fire  
stabled in the grate

The crow with his scolding cry  
had prepared us for dark and cold  
and the shutting of summer's eye.

Then one morning like June as bold  
ruddy in all his brawn  
there he was in the park  
throwing diamonds on the lawn

He stroked each mossy mournful rock  
like an old dog's head  
and turned the fountain's snuffling  
into giggles instead  
He made the crickets tune their shins  
like mad Hungarian violins

He unbuttoned the roses  
as if they were blouses  
made them expose chill nipples to the bees  
The wasps we thought were dead  
brown corpses on the sill  
woke snorting from their trance and spun  
in the gilded circus of the sun  
[1951, at Yaddo]

[Six Amputated Roses]

Six amputated roses red and white  
elected to this bouquet upon the table  
particularized this way we do expect  
something special from their chilly heads  
so singular and shut stubborn as love

Snidely closed these opium bowls  
secret sensuous for all their velvet looks  
To get at the double dewdrops  
in their buds beauty and truth  
shall we bite them from their stems  
and swallow whole?

How upset we are next day to find the arrangement  
changed the still-life something else  
it's multiplied  
The same six red and white have  
opened their faces

lips within scalloped lips appear  
Effusive now and sparkling with confessions  
the goblets grown so wide  
why will not the mystery not spill out  
Farther inside  
[1950s]

### On a Cushion

In midnight stream a stuffed upholstered stag  
stands stirring starry ripples, his antlers glow  
frosty on arctic sky where gold and crimson names  
outflame aurora. An emerald wreath of leaves  
with spangled veins, enhalos the noble scene  
which, scarlet-backed, gilt-tassled, framed  
in gilded braid, is sewn on softest velvet—  
it seems—until my cheek I let recline  
on the plump pneumatic belly of the stag (or moose?)  
—Oh, jagged stings! Like staples punching in!—  
Or like gravel and burrs they scrape harsh my skin.  
All bristle is the stag (or elk?)—an angry welt  
I got from its splendid pelt. But Lethbridge  
recollections, sweet, ooze from the Brillo  
pillow where's stenciled the stag (or moose? or elk?)  
in midnight stream, stuck all four feet.  
[1970]

### In Iowa: A Primitive Painting

Put carnations behind the ears  
of cows, the black and blond and brown  
munching while hardly moving  
on mats of green. Four-legged furniture  
of the fields, full bags of nourishment  
and comfort hanging down  
polish of the morning sunlight  
on warm sides. They are the mother-  
beasts, the stolid and innocent ones  
and we the babes that feed on them.  
From the car coasting 80 West

I reach a long arm out to put red  
carnations behind all the black  
and blond and brown wagging ears  
of cows that munch  
while hardly moving on slopes,  
in hollows of green.

[1970s]

### The Waves Are Making Waves

The waves are making waves,  
it is their work to make  
themselves, to gather white  
on the ridges, rush to sand,  
to reap white, heap white, spill  
over racing ledges on roughs  
where wild whites churn.  
In the ruts the waves make  
white run over white, it is  
their work to run, to earn  
wind's wage, tide's full work done.

[Circa January 1970]

### Her Management 2

She can't compose two things  
alike: every pebble on the beach,  
every pit within a peach  
is singular; the rings  
within a tree  
fail at symmetry.

I look at my toe:  
there's not another, I know,  
to match it. See this ear?  
Its twin is only near-  
ly like it. That wave,  
the dark concave

underneath its hurl,  
reoccurs, a different curl.

In her spontaneous script  
the penmanship is tipped  
to a new slant at each next  
line, although the text

repeats. Yet she can't refrain  
from duplications—like the rain—  
imitative every drop;  
she writes the rain and can't stop  
because she can't make  
a perfect pair

of tears, of whorls of hair,  
of circles on a lake  
of shadows or of leaves  
or sleeves  
for the ripe  
corn. She can't shape

a spot of sunlight or a grape  
of the same stripe  
as the one beside it or copy  
a single bee. "Daisy, daisy,"  
she scribbles all  
summer in loops and rounds unidentical.

She tries to rhyme, let's say,  
a school of clouds, a wild bouquet  
of flames, a scarf of birds:  
they bolt into disorder,  
explosive words  
on pages without a border.

Ignorant of measure,  
she can't compose a square;  
her book:  
a crook-  
ed treasure,  
published everywhere.

[Summer 1957]

To D.H. Lawrence

You are dead, Lawrence.  
No, how can this be—?  
Not when the best of you is here  
with me.

The very best of you  
the essential tear  
loosed from your eye's brink  
has fallen here.

The one most reddest blood drop  
that which stood  
at your heart's edge  
has come to good wells  
and now distends the vein  
of my lush passion  
and is moist again.

Come dear, I give you dwelling,  
your shade is not astray,  
alert and compelling  
climb up in me and sway.

Fasten here the lute's string  
that quivers alone  
though the lute be crumbled  
the plucking finger gone.

[1936]

Walking with Louis

I remember walking in Central Park  
with Louis. This was a long time ago.

We'd bumped into each other on 59<sup>th</sup>  
Street, I think. It was a sunny day.

We waded through the pigeons on the  
hexagonal tiles, between the rows  
of old benches full of Sunday sitters.

We wandered around the zoo.

Louis did the talking, mostly in puns.

We laughed a lot. I remember my elation

at walking next to such a famous man.

Louis had put some poems of mine into

an anthology named "A Treasury of Great  
Poems." I was thrilled at the implication.

Moreover, among the "S"s in the Index

I stood next to Swinburne! And Louis

said I seemed to have issued out of

D. H. Lawrence and Emily Dickinson. (What

a fox he is!) The beautiful thing

about Louis is—*still is*—that

meeting him always makes you feel good.

That bubbling spring of wisdom

and humor, let it not cease. In fact,

let it increase. If possible.

On the day the world explodes (if it  
does) I'd like to be standing next to

Louis. Whatever he'd say would be so

true and funny I'd forget to be scared.

[1950s. Note: The "Louis" referred to here is Louis Untermeyer.]

## YOU SHELTONS AND

lots like you out

there we like you

a lot You are the

sweet of the earth

not the salt Salt

is what cattle lick

what's put into

wounds by hate Hate

having wounded

Salt's cheap maybe  
necessary abrasive  
but sweet is rare  
rare as what it  
feeds Luxurious  
bees their sipping  
places hard to find  
here It's hard to  
blossom in Stony-  
ville sting of  
salt everywhere  
Sweet of the earth  
air sunlight rare  
Out there you  
people not salt  
not like Lot's  
wife Lots of you  
the sweet of the  
earth out there we  
like you a lot

[1960s. Note: May sent this poem as a thank you for her stay at Poets' House at the University of Arizona in Tucson.]

One of the last of May's twenty cat poems:

How Could We Leave You?

- [1] How could we leave you, Boa? Yet we did. You came to us in the summer, and now we must go. You were reluctant to come in, and now it's winter, you won't go out. And we must go to seek summer, Boa. You're not our cat, but this is your house. Will you freeze and starve? Or go with the coons, learn their trails of scavenge? I fixed a nest with my old sweater in the shed out back, where the gas meter is—door open a crack. Maybe you'll curl in there, out of the sleet and wind. Our boa, symmetrically striped, slinky, long-legged, who brought the water rat to our door—who crippled a bluejay, springing on it from under the hedge. . . . You had a flea collar on, we hoped you belonged to a neighbor. We went away for two weeks once, and when we came back, 3 a.m. on a dark, windy night, there you were, sitting on the gate—thin, bedraggled, a wound half-healed in

your cheek, some dog's mean doing. But dogs will be dogs.  
You forgave us the moment you heard the Friskies rattle in the box.

But now, it's November. We must migrate. We can't stay longer  
in our chilly summer house. *Your* house, that you adopted. How  
can we leave you here? Yet, here you belong. The pipes are being  
drained. The plumber says you'll be O.K. "Cats are smart—  
she'll wander round and find a home." The Animal Rescue would cage  
you for a week, then put you under. None of our friends can take you.  
We can't take you. To California! Nor would you go. This is your  
house. You sit on the gate. You watch us leave. We climb into  
the car. The mailman comes by. He waves. You canter up the steps.  
And we leave. How can we leave you, Boa? We leave.

- [2] And it is the next day, and we are far away, in Tennessee. The radio  
says it snowed in the northeast, and froze in the night.  
Behind the fan of the heater in this motel beside the highway,  
here in bed I seem to hear your morning cry, Boa.  
What does it mean that we love animals? Their beauty, that is  
unconscious. Their body that is warm, and asks only a stroke now and  
then. Their simplicity. Their mystery, for they apprehend without  
words. Their existence within the moment. And that they are without  
taint, and full of trust.

When you roll over, Boa, your silky belly is angel-soft. You crouch  
on grips of your claws, your back dark, marked like a snake.  
You are Highness, Boa, you are Sphinx. And you can be baby-cute.  
You'll leap into a lap through the narrowest gap, accurately,  
your weight unfelt, and tuck your face into an armpit, and purr.  
How could I leave you, Boa? But we are gone.

[Begun in Arlington, Virginia, on November 24, 1975]