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Body My House

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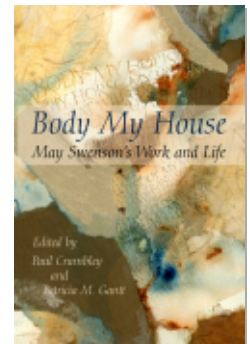
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A FIGURE IN THE TAPESTRY

The Poet's Feeling Runs Ahead of Her Imagination
(Greenwich Village, 1949–50)

Paul Swenson

In an unpublished diary May Swenson kept in typed and handwritten fragments during 1949 and 1950, she wrote, soon after she met and fell in love with her longtime companion Pearl Schwartz:

What is the most important thing now? It is Monday night, November 21. In one month I will be in Utah. In two months, I will be back in New York. Then I will have to be responsible again.

During those two months I have very few obligations. One is to get a book together and submit it to *New Directions* or other publisher. One is to send out single poems to editors. One is to train the dog. One is Christmas presents for those I presumably love. One (this is the most important) is to create a new poem.

And with these few obligations, I have the obligation to be a loveable person. We made love today. How much pretense is there in her? That is not a fair question and it does not matter. Don't ask useless questions. Be a person and all else will follow. Don't sit back and wait for things to happen. Go out and make them happen. O, lucky to have a flat belly full, to be evergreen. To be warm and to be aware, to have not yet met death. So, be happy you fool.

In their honesty, self-irony, and clear-eyed evaluation of the poet's personal and professional circumstances, these few spare and direct lines from

that diary manuscript are characteristic of the openness of May Swenson's writing, both in her poetry and her prose. They combine to create a snapshot of her thoughts as she crossed the threshold of a fertile creative crescent in which many of her most evocative love poems would emerge, as well as a broad variety of other work that would appear in her first book, *Another Animal*, published in 1954.

In a broad sense this paper derives from diary materials entrusted to me in 2002 by Pearl Schwartz, Swenson's second of three companions, and from telephone interviews I conducted with her in May 2004. My wife Leanna Rae Scott and I spent the night with Schwartz in her Greenwich Village apartment in New York, in October 2001, our second visit in two years. She presented me with the manuscript at that time.

Much of the writing in the diary is ardent—voluptuous, sensual, and intensely felt. While the careful observer may absorb the brilliance and vibrancy of the manuscript's imagery, its immediacy, its probing self-analysis, and its unwavering integrity, one may also at times be in danger of drowning in its often unpunctuated prose. It was during this time that Swenson was experimenting with little or no punctuation in both poetry and prose.

This paper will only hint at the material's depth and complexity. While the poet's introspective account of the period describes unimaginable heights of ecstasy and joy, it also plumbs moments of self-doubt, confusion, and despair. I find I can read it only in short bursts, given its powerful personal impact. This is particularly true for me because of the admiration and identification I retain for the person I perceive my sister to be. My intention is to treat the material with interest, appreciation, and respect.

When Pearl Schwartz and May Swenson met in May 1949, within a few days of Swenson's thirty-sixth birthday, Schwartz was just past twenty-six, an attendant at the Willard Parker Contagious Disease Hospital in Manhattan. Of Mediterranean descent, with dark hair, brown eyes, and olive skin, she presented a striking contrast to the blonde, fair-skinned, first-born daughter of Swedish immigrants, almost ten years her senior.

In one of several telephone interviews with me, Schwartz described herself at the time of their meeting as "without focus or future." Within days of their first acquaintance, "on the afternoon May had been to the Bronx Zoo and had returned to write the poem, 'Lion'—all in one sitting—she allowed me to read it," Schwartz said. "I recognized it as superior work. I realized she was a very good poet."

"My unexpressed desire, ever since I was an adolescent, was to support

a creative person. Also, I loved blue eyes. Opposites often attract and it was true in this case,” she added.

Throughout the manuscript in my possession, Swenson referred to Schwartz under the code name Jay—sometimes shortened to the initials J. J., or simply to one initial, J., as it is in the poem, “Coda to J.,” first published in 2003 in *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*. The poet’s third collection, *Half Sun Half Sleep*, contained this dedication: “For J., the first to read this book.”

The couple’s affectionate names for each other were Blackie for Pearl and Miken for May, a nickname derived from the Swedish “Maj” (pronounced My). “She called me Blackie because of my dark hair and olive skin,” Schwartz said. “In public, we went by the book—I called her May and she called me Pearl.”

The universality and pliant malleability of most of May Swenson’s love poems, applicable in their metaphorical dexterity to both heterosexual and homosexual love, was undoubtedly a deliberate artistic conceit that also served to protect the poet’s private life.

“She chose not to make clear what her [sexual] leanings were,” Schwartz told me. Using the code name “Jay” veiled the relationship in androgyny. “It was dangerous at the time to be gay,” she said.

Despite the nonjudgmental diversity and somewhat culturally safe atmosphere of Greenwich Village, disclosure could have affected publication of her work and possibly ruined her career, Schwartz observed. Each person in a similar position had to make those kinds of choices, she added.

In a remarkable November 3, 1949, diary entry, Swenson asked in a long, run-on sentence without punctuation,

What if one day were reported just what happened without embellishment would it be a specimen incorporating essences that make up other days that make up my life would it contain the catalytic particle that determines the basic sensation I call experience would the wooden uprights the facts that took place barely show the shape of the finished structure though undecorated though unplastered the windows merely open squares the doors admitting sun wind and night through the open floors and ceilings the rooms above and below transparent a series of shells but form the main thing the unadorned skeleton more visible more striking for that?

This moment-to-moment chronicle proceeds from bed, to breakfast, to

the butcher shop for stew meat, back to May Swenson's apartment at 23 Perry Street, and through an afternoon and evening of preparing supper for and eating with friends. It begins with an intimate scene, from which I excerpt the following:

. . . 9 o'clock. The chill autumn sky is in the window. The bed is warm. Jay is warm beside me. Half awake I feel her body pressed against my back. I turn and embrace her. Her dark rumpled head closed eyes still dedicated to sleep her mouth sharply carved resolute in sleep, her cheekbones Grecian in their pure outline her olive face so mysterious without motion. . . .

It is her day off from the hospital. We can have breakfast together listen to the new records Paul brought perhaps I will remember and tell her my dream though I hardly remember any dreams lately reality is too absorbing and attractive. She no longer relates her dreams saving them for her analyst. She stirs, asks the time. I tell her to stay in bed I will make tea.

At breakfast, the conversation turns to the couple's first meeting:

Jay said we should give a Christmas present to Clara, for it was through her that we encountered each other—that night at Kiutsuo's in the early spring when coming from Saul Baizerman's with Hymie, we went to the Japanese boy's house on Greenwich Street and I met Clara, and the night shortly after that when I called for her to go folk-dancing and I passed on the dark street a woman in slacks a wide belt and polo and turned to look after her, and later at Kiutsuo's the phone rang Clara answered her voice changed she smiled told the voice to 'come up and present yourself' and I said being introduced Didn't I just see you in the street? She said no I said, Someone who looked just like you—and today for the first time Jay told me it *was* her! It was her after all.

Within weeks after May Swenson and Pearl Schwartz met, several new love poems flowered, including "To a Dark Girl," written the same month of their introduction. "Mornings Innocent" and "Love Is" emerged the next month, in June 1949. Strangely, the incantatory love poem, "Our Forward Shadows," which appeared in mid-April, a month before their meeting, seems a prophetic foreshadowing of the event. Constructed so that the title is read as the first line, the poem begins,

Our Forward Shadows

all we see as yet
slant tall
and timid
on the floor

the stage is set
each waits
in the long lit door . . .

The complete text of "To a Dark Girl," published for the first time in 2003 in *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson*, follows:

Lie still and let me love you
first with my eyes
that feast upon you
as on deep skies
to count the constellations
Below your breast Andromeda
Orion and the rest

Lie still and let me love you
now with my hands
that dream over your body
as in wondrous lands
skiers ascend sun-mantled peaks
and sweep to snow-smooth hollows
where silence speaks

Lie still and let me love you
with my mouth
pressed among strange flowers
elixirs of the south
to drink their dewy musk
or like rich grapes
I nuzzle with my lips
until their wine escapes

Lie still and let me love you
with all my weight
urgent upon you

Deep-keeled elate
my body greets you a leaping boat
challenging your tide
to be the stronger
And now afloat
lie still no longer

Demand I love you
the more the more
while passion's breakers
bear us to their shore

Schwartz explained that physical intimacy between the couple was not quite so immediate as it may appear in verse—a choice, she said, that May Swenson made. Meanwhile, Schwartz said, she herself chose to briefly keep a lid on emotional intimacy while the relationship sorted itself out. “May wanted to know me before she got involved. She wouldn’t go to bed immediately. She played chess with me and she took me to the theater to see a play called *The Moon Is Green*,¹ which was marvelous. When I realized I was in love with her, it scared the hell out of me. Because of my parents’ experience—people loving people meant a lot of pain to me. I put feeling in a box until I could be safe.”

The safety came, as Schwartz recalled, when “May made it very clear that she was serious about me—that she was not a fly-by-night person.” That seriousness, and its resulting outpouring of emotion, not only shaped itself into poetry but also spilled over onto Swenson’s diary pages.

“Must treat this as if no one will read it or else my thoughts are halted in the rush,” Swenson wrote in an October 3, 1949, entry. The entry continues:

Whether to deal with the present moment (which contains itself *and* the past and future in its essential oils), or remember what has gone before, or record prognostications for tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?

We will go backward step by step. To the two of us in bed. I have never known greater delight than with her—it is beyond the imagination’s power and I had always thought that desire conjures images of fulfillment beyond reality’s possibility, but here it is in the opposite, and my joy these days running the gamut of passion

1. *The Moon Is Blue* opened on Broadway, May 8, 1951, and the title may have been misremembered by Schwartz.

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on a physical plane, the gamut of tenderness on spiritual levels, weaving everything, small and large, into a great rich tapestry of wonder, beauty, delight, is more varied and more immense than anything that I can express no matter how I try—feeling runs ahead of imagination, reality sweeter than any dream, life a thousand times more fascinating, subtle, surprising than any art. So, I am carried, a figure in the tapestry, instead of weaver of it, outside it, and this is disconcerting for I'm not used to that . . .

In June of 1949, Swenson gifted Schwartz and herself with twin rings and a card inscribed,

With this ring, myself I give
never surrendered as to you
May it on your finger live
as long as its twin
to which I am true.

To my darling J. J. Love, Miken, 6/13/49.

It was the sealing of a relationship that would extend to seventeen years together.

Among the love poems that May Swenson wrote in the first bloom of her liaison with Pearl Schwartz are “Mornings Innocent,” “Love Is,” and “To a Dark Girl,” in 1949; “Coda to J.,” “He That None Can Capture,” “Each Day of Summer,” and “Standing Torso” in 1950; “School of Desire” in 1951; and “A History of Love,” “August Night,” and “Night before the Journey” in 1952. Only “Coda to J.,” “To a Dark Girl,” and “A History of Love” were published during her lifetime.

In the enchanted “Each Day of Summer,” Swenson offered this image:

Miraculous as if a mounted knight
crowned caparisoned crossed a soot-grim moat
to a round tower ribbon-tipped
each day of summer
love came bearing love
a chalice of light
We bathed in love and drank it
Then our flesh
seemed like the leaves
enameled bright forever

“May loved summer,” Schwartz observed. “It depressed her to note the weather changing to fall and turning the sky increasingly gray. Summer and warmth were so combined in her mind and spirit in making poetry—that’s how she was constructed. She didn’t always have my kind of energy or *joie de vivre*. She needed an infusion of warmth. The sun, growing things, and all living creatures coming to life gave her that.”

The poem “He That None Can Capture” employs a central image of an acrobat performing high-wire acts above a breathless audience; it ends, “Self-hurled he swims the color-stippled heights / where nothing but whisks of light can reach him / At night he is my lover.” Modeled on Schwartz’s physical agility and independence, and shared with her by the poet on its completion, the poem appeared in Swenson’s first published collection, *Another Animal*. Her choice to cast a male in the protagonist’s role served to mask sexual identity.

In “Night Before the Journey,” the shadow of mortality and dissolution of love intrudes on what is otherwise a playful, tender, and magical love poem:

It is the last night of the world.
I am allowed once more to show my love.
I place a jewel on a cushion.
I make a juggler’s trick.
I become a graceful beast to play with you.

See here something precious, something dazzling:
A garden to be your home,
vast and with every fruit.
The air of mountains for your garment.
The sun to be your servant.
A magic water for you to bathe in
and step forth immortal.

But it is the last night of the world,
and time itself is dying.
Tomorrow my love, locked in the box of my body,
will be shipped away.

This thread—the approaching reality of death—appeared early in the tapestry under construction: a dark line of inquiry, which May Swenson followed with the same interest, curiosity, and instinctual perceptions that fed her examination of all of nature. As early as 1939, at age

twenty-six, she had eloquently probed her own mortality in “I Will Lie Down”:

I will lie down in autumn
let birds be flying

Swept into a hollow
by the wind
I'll wait for dying . . .

And in 1950, while in the initial embrace of her union with Pearl Schwartz, she wrote “Rusty Autumn,” with its image of earth as mother; the poem ends, “Oh mummied breast Oh brown Mother hold me / though you are cold and I am grown grown old.”

In Schwartz’s work at the hospital, with an entire floor consigned to a polio epidemic, death was a constant presence. “I often held my breath as I passed the polio ward—which did no good at all, of course,” she said. She cared for chronic female stroke victims and male “tuberculins.” Because her lungs had been slightly scarred by early exposure to tuberculosis, she was believed to have developed resistance to the disease. One of her duties was to prepare patients who had died for the morgue. “I had to take out their teeth [dentures], tie up their chins, and wash their bodies. Actually it didn’t bother me.”

Despite her acquaintance with death, Schwartz apparently found the shadow of it in May’s work disquieting. I say “apparently,” because she told me she can’t quite remember why or when she wrote a single-spaced page “reply” to May’s November 21, 1949, entry (which I discovered in the envelope containing the diary manuscript), or what significance it had to her at the time. “This awareness you have of death is bad,” Schwartz wrote. “I have it too, but infrequently. There isn’t anything I can do about death. That’s what bothers me. But at other times, I think, ‘I shall live now . . . Death shall not come until I have accomplished a few things that I must. Then I shall be ready for it. Until then I shall fight tooth and nail against it.’”

In 1959, after Schwartz graduated from Hunter College, she and Swenson rode the Greyhound west, sharing lunches Pearl had prepared for the four-day trip.

They stopped first in Los Angeles, where they stayed with Swenson’s sister Grace (also known as Michael) Turetsky and her family. This non-conformist sister may have been the first family member to be told that the couple’s connection was more than a friendship, although Swenson’s brother Roy, second in the birth order of ten siblings, suspected as much,

having deduced a hint of his sister's sexual orientation from some of her college writings.

Next, they traveled north. "May gave a reading in San Francisco and we met Ann Stanford, a poet and teacher," Schwartz said. Ann Stanford would soon after become a well-known poet.

The couple then bussed back to Utah, where Roy Swenson picked them up by car near the Arizona border and drove them on a tour of national parks—Zion, Bryce, and the Grand Canyon—before continuing north to Logan, May's birthplace and home of her parents and three of her siblings. At Utah State University, set in the pastoral foothills of the Wasatch Mountains, Swenson gave a reading of her poetry at the institution where she had graduated twenty-three years earlier, when it was known as Utah State Agricultural College.

Schwartz had been apprehensive about meeting Swenson's family. "I came from a very small family and I wasn't sure I would be comfortable with a large group," she said. "Yet, during the visit, May's family made me feel as if I belonged. We stayed at May's brother Dan's place. May's dad was very nice and her mother and I hit it off," Schwartz recalled. "I believe she wanted to convert me [to the Mormon faith] and she took me to church. I went with her because I respected her." Describing a moment when the Mormon sacrament of bread and water was passed, Schwartz said, "May's mother handed it to me and I took it, although I felt I was being hypocritical."² Schwartz noted, "Both May and I were still smoking at that time, but we never smoked in front of her family."

They visited Swenson's sister, Ruth Eyre, at her home in Logan. "[H]er young daughter Sheri sang a Christian song for us, 'Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam.' I loved that," Schwartz said. The pair then visited May's sister Beth Hall and her husband Jay, a county agent. "[W]e had an outing with a herd of sheep Jay was called to treat." In Provo, Utah, Swenson's youngest sister Margaret Woodbury and her husband Lael also hosted the couple. Schwartz found Margaret "sophisticated and discreet."

"I believe May had told Muggins of our relationship," Schwartz noted. ("Muggins" was the family nickname for Margaret.) "I don't know if anyone else [of the family in Utah] knew. Ruth may have guessed something. [May's brother] George took the time to sincerely thank me for traveling with his sister. It was charming."

2. R.R. Knudson, the poet's last companion and literary executor, recently donated correspondence between Pearl Schwartz and May Swenson's mother, Margaret Hellberg Swenson, to Utah State University.

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In 1963, when Swenson and Schwartz had been together for fourteen years, Swenson wrote “Four Word Lines,” in which the poet described her continuing vulnerability under the warmth of her lover’s gaze: “Your eyes are just / like bees, and I / feel like a flower,” it begins. “Their brown power makes / a breeze go over / my skin...” The poem ends:

I’d let you wade
in me and seize
with your eager brown
bees’ power a sweet
glistening at my core.

“She said my brown eyes were leaf-shaped,” Schwartz confided. She continued:

May worshipped beauty and youth. She never wanted her hair to go gray—it bothered her. If she saw a gray hair in her head, she pulled it out. She disliked that my hair was graying. At first it had a sort of yellow tint, but then it took on a pewter patina—nature took care of that—and May commented on its attractiveness.

When a poem was in progress, she did not share it with me (to talk about it is to defeat the writing of it). But when something was completed, she would not only show it to me, she would wait for me to get home so I could read it—first to myself, then aloud, and offer an opinion.

When May was working part-time at *New Directions* [as a manuscript editor], she would go out in the afternoon to—as she called it—“catch a poem.” And almost always, she was able to do so, because she opened herself to what was around her.

I am not a poet. But I felt I could always tell her the truth of my reaction and she would accept it, just as she would tell me the truth. If I liked the poem, she wanted to know why I liked it—I felt it was kind of my job. If I came away with a sense of wonder, or if I felt there was something wrong with a particular phrase, she would consider that. If she felt I was right, she would rework it.

Once, when I returned home, she offered me a finished poem and seemed grieved that I didn’t immediately read it. “I couldn’t do it justice,” I told her, “but in a little while I will be able to.” That met with her approval and the hurt look evaporated.

According to Schwartz, "Sometime not terribly long after I had moved in with May on Perry Street, I found her crying on the bed. Her unhappiness was that she wasn't writing and she feared she never would again. Nothing was more terrible for her than feeling she was unable to write a poem," Schwartz said. "I jumped on the bed next to her and told her she would write many poems. 'That's who you are,' I said. 'That's what you are made of.' Reassured, she stopped crying."

Schwartz described herself as the more insecure partner in the relationship.

Often, I would ask, "Why do you love me?" May would reply, "Because you are you." "A most unsatisfactory answer," I would protest. Then I would say, "I can tell you why I love *you*; it's easy. Because you have blue eyes (and that will never change), and pretty shell ears, and large teeth—and I love large teeth."

Sometimes I would ask May, "Will you love me forever?" She would answer (honestly), "I will love you as long as I love you." At other times I would say, "You're the best thing that ever happened to me," to which she would inevitably reply, "Poor child."

Years earlier, Swenson had bought Schwartz a toothbrush and presented it with a note that read, "With this toothbrush, I thee wed on a Wednesday in May, for a day, or a year, or forever. For a day can be a year, or a year forever, or forever a day." It was signed "M.S."

After about twelve years together, the relationship still seemed uncertain. "May told me she was 'rather surprised' she was still in love," Schwartz said. For her, however, something had changed. Schwartz told her, "I want to leave." Swenson cried. "She cried so much and for so long, I said, 'All right. I will stay.' She stopped crying."

Pearl Schwartz does not tell this story to imply she sacrificed her own desires in an act of misguided empathy to prolong a relationship that had run its course. She made a considered decision to stay, and said she does not regret that she and Swenson spent five more years together. "While the romantic involvement was not as deep, I simmered down during that period and became a steadier person," Schwartz said. "I did a lot of baking, and we both gained weight. During our eight months in Europe, I took voluminous notes on camping, churches, and art, and on our return to New York, I wrote a book manuscript called *The Blue Tent*. That and my new job filled my time. But those last years were fine in the sense that we got along well."

Preserved in the single-page document she at some forgotten moment penned in reply to May Swenson's November 21, 1949, diary entry, Schwartz's words still apply, decades after the fact. She wrote, "There is no pretense, no pretense I swear my darling. But love is like a river, shallow in some spots, deep in others. I am conscious of you always; you fill a room with such glowing bright emanations that I am dazzled . . . Anyway, dearest, remember this—I love you today, this minute, this very second. That is fact, not farce."

At eighty-three, Pearl Schwartz, who lives in the Village on Barrow Street where she has lived for decades, remains lively, funny, forthright, and generous. She is a writer of searching, evocative short fiction, some of which she has shared with me.

That long-ago November, May Swenson sat in the kitchen on Perry Street to write in her diary, the fast-flowing stream of her consciousness reaching to capture the present moment and to embrace her new love. A letter postmarked Logan, Utah, and a rejection notice from a New York magazine publisher lay on the table, set aside.

Standing in each other's arms, having begun to rumba and coming together kissing slowing to a standstill, Jay said What night? What night? she asked breathlessly. A letter from my mother in the mailbox saying "opp" [a Swedish word] instead of "up" and "my precious daughter" all about Dad becoming bishop and Michael's wedding and the way my poems are being read at the Relief Society meetings and about harvesting the apples. And a letter from *Sat. Review* returning my poems—a blow. So I made stew and put cloves in it—mushrooms, leeks, onions, carrots, tomatoes, peppers, celery—delicious. And while it simmered and Brahms was played by Heifitz on the [phonograph], we hopped into bed and J. made love to me.