# Body My House

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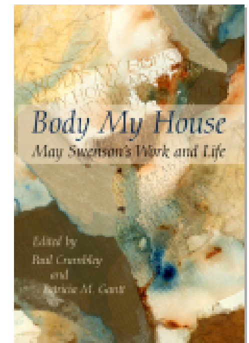


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# May Swenson
## Whitman's Daughter

*Alicia Ostriker*

A great poet is a jewel of multiple faces or facets, and to see the poet from the angle of any one of those facets is to be freshly illuminated and elated. Two decades ago, elatedly writing my essay "May Swenson and the Shapes of Speculation" in the context of the post-1960s women's poetry movement, I felt I had made a wonderful discovery: Swenson wrote "like a woman"—a woman with the temperament of an experimental and speculative scientist (86–101). Today I relish the opportunity to look at Swenson not only as a woman poet (since no matter how proud one may be of the label, "women's poetry" is still ghettoized in the literary world) and not only as somebody in the line of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, although she is that too—and charmingly so—but as the largest thing I can find to say: let us consider May Swenson as an *American* poet. Let us think about Swenson's Americanness in the sense that Tocqueville meant when he wrote, in *Democracy in America*, "It is not impossible to conceive the immense freedom enjoyed by the Americans, and one can also form an idea of their extreme equality. . . ." (242).

Freedom is absence of constraint. Equality is absence of hierarchy, absence of relations of domination and subordination. These principles can animate not only society but poetry. And what better way to demonstrate how exuberantly in the American grain May Swenson is than to see her romping in the leaves of grass, the free and equal leaves of grass Walt Whitman first made available to poetry? For in Swenson as in Whitman, we have a poet of democratic vision and vista, a poet of inclusiveness not exclusiveness, for whom all natural phenomena are equally eligible for

celebration and all levels and layers of language are equally delectable, a poet who is always surprising, who is not *literary*, not *fashionable*, who belongs to no school (cf. Whitman's placing of "creeds and schools in abeyance," early in "Song of Myself")[1] and doesn't need to show off how learned she is, or to condescend, or to be superior, or on the other hand to polemicize—a poet as fresh as fresh milk and as sound as an egg. A poet who looks around and enjoys herself. A poet who likes the idea of getting naked in poetry and is equally interested in speculating about death. A poet who admires her own body. And other people's bodies. And the material body of the world. And who has a sense of humor.

We all know the famous opening of "Song of Myself": "I celebrate myself and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Notice how "assume" can mean "make an assumption" or "assume a form . . . or a disguise" and how Whitman announces the commonness and interchangeability of selves, the loose boundaries of the "I," at the same time as he affirms its physicality. To say that "Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," moreover, not only asserts that we are all made of atoms; the casual phrase "as good," instead of the more formal and correct "equally," implies that the atoms themselves are "good." A little later, Whitman claims:

> Houses and rooms are full of perfumes . . .,
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
> It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
> I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
> I am mad for it to be in contact with me.
>
> (*CP* 25)

The vast majority of Swenson's poems, like Whitman's, take place outdoors. Both poets like the textures of things. Both poets are pleased by plant life, seduced by the sea. In "Inscriptions," at the very opening of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman announces, "Of physiology from top to toe I sing…the Female equally with the male I sing . . . Of Life immense . . . Cheerful, for freest action" (*CP* 5), and a little later,

> Beginning my studies, the first step pleas'd me so much,
> The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
> The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,

1. Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (hereafter, *CP*), 25.

> The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
> I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther
> But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.
> (*CP* 10)

Anyone who has read May Swenson will hear the compatibility between herself and Whitman. If Whitman can say "I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass" (*CP* 25), Swenson too loiters, in what she calls punningly

> A loaf of time
> round and thick
> So many layers
> ledges to climb
> to lie on our
> bellies lolling
> licking our lips . . .[2]

Swenson too likes to contemplate forms and motions, the senses, eyesight, love. "Body my house, my horse, my hound" is one of her favorite topics. Like the Whitman who sings the body electric and tells us, "I find no sweeter fat that sticks to my own bones" (*CP* 38), "The scent of these armpits aroma finer than prayer," and "I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious" (*CP* 42). Swenson writes amusedly in "Lying and Looking,"

> my armpits are fleecy pods;
> my grassy skin's
> darker in folds
> of elbow and groin
> and kneecap dents;
> if I stretch my legs
> each knee's a face
> square-cheeked, pugnacious.
> My thighs dip and play
> in glossy light….
> Oh, I
> wouldn't trade my
> body for anything. Not
> for a dove's white boat,

2. May Swenson, *Nature: Poems Old and New* (hereafter, *N*), 33.

not for a bear's black coat,
not for anything.
(*N* 30–31)

To Swenson, everything on earth speaks body language: a tree has a toe-nail, spring grass grows "out of each pore…itching," a snowplow sucks "celestial clods into its turning neck." The poems on her mother's death, "Nature" and "That the Soul May Wax Plump," are furiously and pal-pitatingly physical. "Poet to Tiger," her most famous rough-and-tumble love poem, is full of the funny things people do with their bodies. When Swenson imagines her soul escaping her body in "Ending," it is through her toe, and she can't help imagining the soul's transparence as "his little jelly belly." ("Belly," by the way, is one of her nicest words—but she may have gotten *that* from Gertrude Stein.) Like the Whitman who described himself as particularly sensitive to touch—"Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch" (*CP* 46)—Swenson is deeply tac-tile everywhere in her poems. "Touching meaning more than sight," she writes in "Deciding" (*N* 36), and in a poem on the senses called "Organs," she concludes "in the legs' lair / carnivora of Touch."[3]

In both Whitman and Swenson, affection for one's own flesh, for the world's body, and for the body of a lover, seem to be knit up into one pan-erotic bundle. Whitman's fantasies of lying with the lover are well-known. Here is one of Swenson's:

To lie with you
in a field of grass
to lie there forever
and let time pass

Touching lightly
shoulder and thigh
Neither wanting more
Neither asking why

To have your whole
cool body's length
along my own….

To feel your breast
rise with my sigh

3. *The Love Poems of May Swenson* (hereafter, *L*), 20.

To hold you mirrored
in my eye

Neither wanting more
Neither asking why
(*L* 74)

Like Whitman, Swenson is tremendously open about affection and the sliding of affection into passion, and the reverse, but she is rather reticent about sexuality. Notwithstanding today's assumption that same-sex love should bravely dare tell its name, this may constitute a poetic advantage and, possibly, a spiritual one. Because Swenson seldom specifies the gender of the beloved, we are all enabled to experience an eroticism that is pure tactility, meditation on the beloved's body and fleshly aliveness and parallel darting blood as "the face's flower and the hair's leaves / quiver in a wind of love on that isle" (*N* 28) that is the island of the other.[4] The equalizing physicality of "Love is little and not loud. / It nests within each cell, and it / cannot be split" (*L* 66) recalls Whitman's "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," but with an eroticizing charge. In "Annual," the presence of the lover speaks through familiar images as well as slightly odd syntax:

your laughter
that suddens me, your hair
a wind that stings me,
your breast a fleece of birds
that hover me,
naked, dawn-colored, cool and warm,

I open to your dew,
beginning in the spring again.
(*L* 72–73)

If we happen to know that Swenson's lover is another woman, the images reinforce that knowledge. If we happen not to know, or not to care, the metaphors stand as reminders that love is natural, that we ourselves are

4. This poem, titled "Love Sleeping," is in sharp contrast to Elizabeth Bishop's "Love Lies Sleeping," a poem whose frightening closing image seems to be of alcoholic oblivion or death, and which itself may be a response to Christina Rossetti's poem "Dream-Love" ("Young Love lies sleeping") or Dowland's "Weep You No More, Sad Fountains," where the beloved "softly, now softly lies sleeping."

part and parcel of the natural world. This is the same as the strategy in the biblical Song of Solomon, where the lovers are scarcely to be distinguished from the garden and vineyard they inhabit, or from each other. The dew to which the lover opens might be a woman's sexual moisture or a man's, or kisses, or perspiration—the ultimate essence of lovemaking is that it reaches through body to soul. In Swenson's "Mortal Surge," one of her many poems analyzing the simultaneous desire and fear involved in lust,

> the stars stare at us face to face
> penetrating even the disguise of our nakedness
> daring us to make the upward leap
> effortless as falling
> if only we relax the bowstring of our will
> (*L* 58)

In "Swimmers," the lovers "in the terror of total delight" resemble the way "the wrestling chest of the sea itself / tangled, tumbles // in its own embrace" (*L* 3).

There are of course exceptions, or half-exceptions, to Swenson's reticence about gender. The final image of "In Love Made Visible," "We are released / and flow into each other's cup" (*L* 27), reads most beautifully if read as a lesbian image. "Year of the Double Spring" and "The School of Desire" imply a lesbian relationship fairly clearly, as does the vial-and-vine image of "You Are." "Because I Don't Know" is all-but-explicitly the poem of a woman desiring a younger woman. Both the reticence and the desire for candor that wrestle with each other in Swenson's eroticism are hinted at as the motive of metaphor in "The Truth Is Forced":

> Not able to be honest in person
> I wish to be honest in poetry.
> Speaking to you, eye to eye, I lie
> because I cannot bear
> to be conspicuous with the truth.
> Saying it—all of it—would be
> taking off my clothes
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> One must be honest somewhere. I wish
> to be honest in poetry.
> With the written word.
> Where I can say and cross out

and say over and say around
and say on top of and say in between
and say in symbol, in riddle,
in double meaning, under masks
of any feature, in the skins
of every creature.
And in my own skin, naked.
I am glad, indeed I dearly crave
to become naked in poetry,
to force the truth
through a poem . . .
(*N* 11–12)

This is a little like Dickinson's line, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," with fear battling the yearning for disclosure. In a sense Swenson's poem is truer to the nature of internal conflict than Dickinson's, for the poet twists and turns all through the poem; the poem does not state something known, but discovers its truth in its process. Swenson's "you" and her punning "eye to eye," along with the punning "lie," at first seem to mean a single other, but "Whether you are one or two or many / it is the same," and the feared and desired nakedness, is not an end but a means. Truth, forced through symbols and riddles and finally the naked self, into the poem, revealed to the poet herself, is a burden borne and born.

Interestingly, a few of the poems in the last book Swenson completed before her death, *In Other Words,* seem entirely relaxed about describing woman-woman love. The relationship in "Under the Baby Blanket" is a long-term, comically comfortable one like that in "Poet to Tiger," but here the poet doesn't mind saying that the baby blanket "brought home . . . from your Mom" by her forty-seven-year-old lover is covered with twelve squares of little girls in sunbonnets (12–13). In "Her Early Work," a woman poet (Moore or Bishop?) is described as talking through "layers of masks," making it impossible to know "who was addressed, or ever undressed," since

Wild and heathen scents
of shame or sin
hovered since childhood,
when the delicious was always
forbidden.
(58)

Most delightfully, the poem "The Gay Life" riffs on how in any couple there is likely to be, for better and worse, a continual shifting of the roles of Mommy, Daddy, and Baby.

A corollary of eroticism for both Whitman and Swenson is that one is "a simple separate person" not contained between one's hat and boots. Connection is basic. The fluid Whitman effuses his flesh in eddies and identifies with everyone and everything he encounters, including slaves and prostitutes, ship captains and beggars: "of these one and all I weave the song of myself" (*CP* 36). Swenson isn't quite so fluid, but many of her love poems describe a tangling or reflecting or melting away of self in other—"we are released / and flow into each other's cup"—and like the Whitman who sees himself as an evolutionary product ("I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots, / And am studded with quadrupeds and birds all over" [*CP* 46]), Swenson enjoys imagining her natural history and her natural affinities. In the wonderful poem "At Truro," she rehearses her past incarnations as a sea bird, then as a crab, then:

> When I was a sea worm
> I never saw the sun,
>
> but flowed, a salty germ,
> in the bloodstream of the sea.
>
> (*N* 54–55)

Having "touched my foot / to land's thick back," she has a yen to go back to the sea. Similarly, Whitman claims, "I think I could turn and live with animals" (*CP* 47). In "Order of Diet," the theme is transformation and metamorphosis:

> The stone is milked to feed the tree;
> the log is killed when the flame is hungry.
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> Ashes find their way to green;
> the worm is raised into the wing;
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> It is true no thing of earth can die.
>
> (*N* 74–75)

she says, echoing Whitman's "To die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier," and then going on to ask, "What then feeds on us? . . . / To what beast's intent / Are we His fodder and nourishment?"

I do not mean to say that Swenson "takes" from Whitman or that Whitman "influences" Swenson. Source studies are boring, and besides, how do I know Swenson even read Whitman? No, what I want to say is that Whitman is a door and Swenson walks through it. "Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" he cries (*CP* 41). That Whitman is "the meal equally set, the meat for natural hunger" (*CP* 37), and that Swenson partakes and is healthy. That Whitman, the most benign of father figures, gives poets—gives all of us—liberal permission to play, and Swenson plays liberally. That Whitman is America (Ezra Pound said of him, "His crudity is an exceeding great stench but it *is* America") and that Swenson inhabits this most generous of poetic landscapes.

Fresh air. Fresh language. Endlessly fresh observation. Whitman famously (and tirelessly) invokes "Poets to come!" and declares, "I spring from the pages into your arms" (*CP* 349). A rather lovely book called *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman* (Martin) includes essays pairing Whitman with Langston Hughes, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Thom Gunn, Hart Crane, and Fernando Pessoa. I myself have proposed that if it were not for the walker in the city of "Song of Myself," J. Alfred Prufrock would never have issued his famous invitation "Let us go then, you and I . . ." ("Loving Walt Whitman" 220). A plenitude of women poets have expressed their homage to Whitman—June Jordan and Sharon Olds among them (Middlebrook 14–27).[5] Whitman "saw his poetry not as meaning or a container of meaning but as the event at which or out of which meaning is made possible," claims the critic Ed Folsom (83), and I do think this is true of *American* meaning. Whitman inaugurates that breadth and openness that is America's peculiar contribution to world poetry. But Roy Harvey Pearce says "all American poetry [since *Leaves of Grass*] is, in essence if not in substance, a series of arguments with Whitman" (qtd. in Folsom 83), and here I am struck by the proto-Bloomian tone of "arguments." Do the poets want to kill the father? In fact, Whitman himself anticipates and supports that eventuality: "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher" (*CP* 65).

So I imagine the process in Swenson as in many of us. Walk through the door; inhabit the landscape. Look and see. Speculate. The catalogs of phenomena in *Leaves of Grass* were endless and, one must confess, can be endlessly boring; now look, look, and look again at the specifics. Look

5. See also my study of American women's poetry, *Stealing the Language*, chapter 5, for a discussion of the features of women's poetry which seem most indebted to Whitman.

at Swenson looking. How she looks, licks, touches, and tastes the details. The particularities. "Look Close," she titles one poem, and no poet does so with more inexhaustible attention. I feel an explosive amazement close to what I feel for Shakespeare when I read Swenson describing—for the *nth* time—water, for example. Or snow. Never the same metaphors twice, for Swenson is like the scientist who knows that any piece of reality may yield an infinite array of explanations. When she starts a poem called "One of the Strangest," describing the flamingo, "Stuffed pink stocking, the neck, / toe of pointed black, the angled beak, / thick heel with round eye in it upside down, the pate" (*N* 113–14), I just about swoon with happy laughter, registering the utterly apt comic inventiveness of the metaphors together with their sound-play: *st*uffed and *st*ocking, pin*k* and sto*ck*ing and ne*ck* and bla*ck*, bla*ck* and bea*k*, bl*a*ck and *a*ngled, bea*k* and thi*ck*, *t*oe and *pointed*, r*ou*nd and d*ow*n—her ear knows, by the way, that *f*s and *p*s are related, as are *b*s and *p*s in another direction—and then of course she goes on a triplet or so later to a conclusion that is consciously clumsy in sound and syntax right up until its lovely final words:

> When planted
> on one straight stem, a big fluffy flower
>
> is body a pink leg, wrung, lifts up over,
> lays an awkward shoe to sleep on top of,
> between flocculent elbows, the soft peony wings.

After laughter, yes, a recognition of beauty. Swenson's poem is an *enactment*, a *demonstration*, in the laboratory of language, in metaphor and cadence, in consonants and vowels, of what Walt Whitman all too often merely asserts. One might cite dozens of poems by Swenson that vigorously practice what Whitman sententiously preaches.

Space, for Swenson, is more complicated than it is for Whitman. Whitman writes the "Song of the Open Road" but is rather vague about what he encounters there, except that the idea puts him in an expansive mood. When Swenson gets in a car and actually drives it around the American West, she produces some of her most heart-stoppingly textured writing. Nothing else in poetry remotely resembles the suite of travel poems in *New & Selected Things Taking Place*[6] that begins with "Bison Crossing Near Mt. Rushmore." This experimental poem, in which a herd of cars is temporarily

6. Hereafter, *TTP*. The poems also appear in Swenson's *Nature*, but not as a sequence. One of the poems in the suite, "A Couple," appears with different lineation in *Nature*.

stopped by a herd of bison, is a virtual video in verse. Just as textured is the poem "Speed," in which a windshield is being spatter-painted by tints of

> Fuselages
> split on impact,
>
> stuck, their juices
> instantly dried . . .
>
> arrow—
> shapes, wings gone,
> bellies smitten
> open

The "painting" of the windshield goes in six hundred miles from fine line to thick impasto to "a palimpsest the sun / bakes through," and the poem never once uses the word "insects" (*TTP* 5).

The next in the suite, "The North Rim," is a poem to rebut anyone who thought a human being could never write a poem adequate to the Grand Canyon. This poem *is* adequate; listen to the beginning of the third stanza, where, in midday, "Angular eels of light / scribble among the buttes and crinoline / escarpments" (*TTP* 6). *Eels of light! Crinoline escarpments*! I fall off my chair thinking, *this* is what metaphor is for, these breathtaking connective shots that hit their targets as if they were in a Zen dream.

Finally, "Camping in Madera Canyon" captures freezing nightfall, sleep, and a dawn in which, "In a tent, first light tickles the skin / like a straw"; there is a "sun, about to pour / gold lava over the mountain, upon us"; and as the campers scald their lips with coffee,

> Daybirds wake, the woods are filling
> with their rehearsal flutes and pluckings,
> buzzes, scales and trills. Binoculars
> dangling from our necks, we walk
> down the morning road. Rooms of the woods
> stand open. Glittering trunks
> rise to a limitless loft of blue. New snow,
> a delicate rebozo, drapes the peak that,
> last night, stooped in heavy shadow . . .

Among the myriad sound effects that produce the scene, listen to the contrast between *daybirds wake, filling, flutes and pluckings*, and the deep tones of *snow, rebozo, shadow*. Then what seems pure physical accuracy

becomes, as so often in Swenson, metaphysics. "Night hid this day. What sunrise may it be / the dark to?" (*TTP* 8–9).

Love is as complicated as space in Swenson's work. Where Whitman announces and indeed insists on love but never gives us an actual portrait of a relationship, Swenson amply enacts affection and shows how it works in daily life as well as in moments of passionate intimacy. A few of Swenson's poems do seem to quarrel with Whitmanic enthusiasms. His "hairy wild-bee" in "Children of Adam" that "murmurs and hankers up and down, that gripes the full-blown lady-flower, curves upon her with amorous firm legs, takes his will of her, and holds himself tremulous and tight till he is satisfied" (*CP* 78) might have provoked a sardonic smile or frown in Swenson. She, too, has observed bees and flowers, as she shows in "A Couple," but she has some questions. The poem begins,

> A bee
> rolls
> in the yellow
> rose.
> Does she
> invite his hairy
> rub?
> (*L* 14)

Ah, perhaps so, perhaps not. By the third stanza, the poet is asking, "Does his touch / please / or scratch?" Not the kind of query Whitman ever made. And by the poem's close, when the bee has finished "his honey-thieving" and leaves the flower,

> she
> closes,
> still
> tall, chill
> unrumpled on her stem.
> (*L* 15)

Point, match. In the poem "All That Time" (*N* 163–4), Swenson describes the relationship of two trees, perhaps in a response to Whitman's famous "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" (*CP* 93). Whitman's poem comes in the middle of "Calamus," his sequence of poems celebrating "manly love." The tree, "without any companion…grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green" and the poet wonders how it can go on "uttering joy-

ous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near, / I know very well I could not" (*CP* 93). Possibly having noticed that Whitman yearned and idealized but actually knew very little about relationships in either the human or the arboreal world, Swenson wrote her own skeptical little allegory:

> I saw two trees embracing.
> One leaned on the other
> as if to throw her down.
> But she was the upright one.
> Since their twin youth, maybe she
> had been pulling him toward her
> all that time,
>
> and finally almost uprooted him.
> He was the thin, dry, insecure one,
> the most wind-warped, you could see.
> (*N* 163)

Speculating that "he" might be crying on "her" shoulder, or on the other hand maybe trying to weaken her or make her bend over backward for him just a little bit, despite her stubbornness, or then again that

> he had been willing
> to change himself—
> even if it was for the worse—
> all that time.

Swenson concludes,

> At the top they looked like one
> tree, where they were embracing.
> It was plain they'd be
> always together.
> Too late now to part.
> When the wind blew, you could hear
> them rubbing on each other.
> (*N* 163–64)

Like many a man and wife, of course, but part of the subtlety of the poem is the way, after the opening "I saw," Swenson moves into the casual "you could see…you could hear," which is a way of addressing the self and the reader at the same time, aligning us with her. No friction between poet and reader—*we* see and understand alike—at the same time as the poem posits the mysteriously complicated, competitive, frictional, and codependent

ecology of people and trees in a long lifetime. When Whitman called for poems of "Nature without check with original energy," this sort of glimpse of nature and human nature cannot be what he expected.

And yet it is appropriate. It follows. The earthiness Whitman asked of us finds a home in Swenson. Perhaps there is no simpler way of demonstrating their affinity than by returning to images of grass. Whitman, early in "Song of Myself," calls grass "the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven," announces "Tenderly will I use you curling grass," gives his lifelong opus the generic title of *Leaves of Grass*, and uses the image again and again throughout his work to represent what is most natural and most ubiquitous. Now look at a hitherto unpublished poem called "The Maiden in the Grass," composed in 1936 when Swenson was twenty-three:

> Little grasses
> rising beside my arms
> and at my underarms . . .
> little wistful Grass
> your roots are white as my arms.
> shaggy rug of grass on which my body is pressed,
> my heart leaps against thee, Grass..
> do you hear my heart?
>
> O stone
> I lie cheek to cheek with thee..
> subconscious thing
> feel here velvet flesh
> and breath of rapture..
> Stone you are my lover
> You I take between my breasts.
>
> Wind, come
> you shall find out all the tender hollows
> of my young body . . .
> Come gently to me Wind
> and pass a hand along my thighs.
>
> I kiss thee, little hot Grass..
> I creep up against thee, yearning Stone..
> Have me, Wind.. I turn, I part my garment.
> [Ellipses in the original][7]

7. Published by permission of the Swenson estate; I thank Paul Crumbley for sharing a copy of this manuscript poem with me.

This pivotal poem betrays the young poet's girlish attachment to traditionally "poetic" language, the language of the past, while at the same time it is a virtual *ars poetica* that anticipates the body of her future work, the work of the body, the eroticism that wishes to share itself: "I part my garment."[8] The connection between grass and eroticism remains a thread in her writing. When her love life is evidently going well, she writes herself an erotic *aubade*: "Alert and fresh as grass I wake // and rise on mornings innocent." For both Whitman and Swenson, grass also represents the acceptance of death and the assurance of ongoing life. In the closing moments of "Song of Myself," Walt tells us, "I depart as air, / I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love. / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" (*CP* 68).

Swenson, too, bequeaths herself in lines we may read on a bench placed on her grave in Logan, Utah, the town of her childhood. It is good to think of the ongoing life invoked in this poem, "The Exchange," and to see how finely a poem of the end of life resembles a poem of youth:

> Now, my body flat, the ground
> breathes. I'll be the grass.
>
> Populous and mixed is mind.
> Earth, take thought. My mouth, be moss.
>
> Field, go walking. I, a disk,
> will look down with seeming eye.
>
> I will be time, and study to be evening.
> You, world, be clock.
>
> I will stand, a tree, here,
> never to know another spot.
>
> Wind, be motion. Birds, be passion.
> Water, invite me to your bed.
>
> (*TTP* 210)

8. "Maiden in the Grass" seems to me to be clearly indebted to Whitman's pan-eroticism, and this phrase in particular to recall the moment in "Song of Myself" Section 5 when the poet recalls how his soul "parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart." (*CP* 28)