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Body My House

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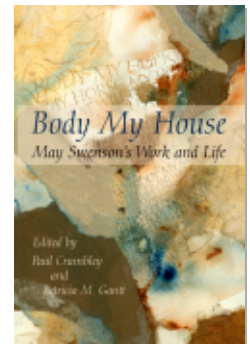
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THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE

May Swenson's Manuscript Witnesses

Martha Nell Smith

*The poets down here don't write nothing at all
They just stand back and let all be.*

Bruce Springsteen, "Jungleland"

May's Mormon family was putting together its own book about the Swensons and their children. They asked Anna Thilda May Swenson to fill out a page about herself for this book. So, in a space on the page to list children, if any, May wrote the names of the thirty-nine poems she'd published since leaving Utah.

R. R. Knudson, *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson*

This essay's title makes plain my subject: reflection upon some of May Swenson's manuscripts, some of the stories they tell, the poetic processes they reveal, the powerful testament they are to her commitment to the truth. Beginning by focusing on "THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE," a sheaf of poems never printed or distributed through the usual mechanical vehicles for reproduction, and concluding with reflections on handwritten and typescript drafts of the poem "At the Poetry Reading" written over the course of ten years, this essay is about Swenson and audience, about Swenson's role as poet, about Swenson and writing and audience, about audience as a kind of technology for poetry. If as a writer one considers a sense of audience a technology (or a kind of tool, with explanation and performance as kinds of knowledge application), that technology

will provide analytical perspectives that are not possible if one writes with only one audience in mind (or, of course, under the illusion of writing with no audience in mind). What has happened when such a sheaf as “THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE” has been made, carefully prepared, apparently not for the publishing house but for interested readers to find?

I am glad, indeed I dearly crave
to become naked in poetry,
to force the truth
through a poem,
which, when it is made, if real,
not a dummy, tells me
and then you (all or any, eye to eye)
my whole self,
the truth.
 (“The Truth Is Forced,” *Nature* 12)¹

At the advent of the twenty-first century, the challenges are such that this handful of years already feels like a millennium, maybe two or three, old. Humans have always needed poetry, for “Art, more intimately, deals with, and forms, the emotional and spiritual climate of our experience.” Human need for poetry, for poets, has been constant, continuous, everpressing. So perhaps it is neither unusual nor exceptional to say that now, more than ever, poets are not a luxury, they are a necessity, particularly those of Swenson’s ilk, who flatly declare that “poetry is not philosophy; poetry makes things be, right now.”²

In the public sphere of the United States as of this writing, language is flagrantly and persistently corrupted. False analogies are repeated without appropriate critique so that faith in intelligent design is equated with the scientific theory of evolution. Sadly, the “fourth estate” has become more a matter of stenography than editorial stewardship. Things come into being and *are* simply because they are said over and over again, as if they are the truth. Thus (self-identified) conservative think tanks have been able to turn something with widely held scientific consensus—the fact of global warming—into a supposed “issue,” about which most citizens think

1. Fifteen lines of the second stanza of this poem, which was published in the posthumously printed *Nature*, were published previously in 1993 in *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson*. See pages 45–46 of Alicia Ostriker’s essay here in.
2. This quote appears in “The Poet as Antispecialist” in *Made with Words* (hereafter, *MWW*), 99. “Poetry is not a luxury” is the title of Audre Lorde’s essay collected in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 36–39.

there is an ongoing debate. In 2006, religious conservatives similarly use the presidential pulpit to conflate scientific inquiry with religious belief. Because of assertions that produce murky, unclear subjects, language is therefore repeatedly emptied, eviscerated, stolen. As Swenson observed, “language is not only a tool in poetry; it is its very being. In a poem, Subject is not presented by means of language; but Language is the thing presented with the aid of subject” (MWW 99). Over and over again, Swenson mused on a significant part of this fact—that *subject* (say, in poetic discourse) gives, or by implication (say, in political discourse) steals, language from us.

This essay’s ruminations blend my own musings on Swenson’s manuscripts (and what I have learned from looking at them) with Swenson’s more capacious, more generous, more insightful reflections, bequeathed in her manuscripts, in her published poems (or “children”), and in her abundant published prose. Doing so, I propose the necessity of refusing to stand back and *let all be* and the concomitant imperative to, as H. D. would have it, “Write, write, or die” (H. D. 7).

Swenson’s “In Consideration of Writing Prose” anticipated H. D.’s declaration:

What do I have to say before I die? It is something no one else has said or can say because since each one of us is one of a kind, what I will say is important coming from me. . . . True, each person is different from all others, but, equally true, all persons in a sense are the same—not identical but similar. . . . Will you in your message emphasize individuality and difference or commonality and similarity with others? Do you want to show how you are like others and they like you or how you deviate? Perhaps both? Is not all art a cry of “Look at me! Learn from me! Listen!” . . . Does not the artist crave understanding of self in equal measure as he insists on exploring, teaching, imposing his ideas and standards on others? . . .

What of an un-self-centered attitude—one aiming not at seeking understanding for himself, not self-revelatory and self-obscuring at once, but with the object of understanding his audience and revealing *it* to itself and himself. Not “Look, here I am!” but “See, there you are” (MWW, epigraph).

Individuality. Uniqueness. Individuality and uniqueness and tension with community, friction with and within group bonds even as they are craved. Absolute confidence in the power to reveal the other—the audience of,

not the writer of, the poem. What, *What*, of an *un*-self-centered attitude? *What* of really probing the impact, the engineering of writing via its relation to, its consciousness of, audience? By using a poem by William Blake as an epigraph for and to title her carefully choreographed manuscript sheaf, "THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE," Swenson placed her work directly in a lineage of visionary poets and implicitly conveyed a strong sense of a literary audience, one apt to recognize how she situated her work and her being as poet:

Never seek to tell thy love,
 Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
 Silently, invisibly,

I told my love, I told my love,
 I told her all my heart;
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fear
 Ah, she did depart;

Soon as she was gone from me
 A traveler came by
Silently, invisibly
 He took her with a sigh.³

It is not at all surprising that Swenson was drawn to this wry lyric of Blake's to serve as epigraph to poems she collected in the late 1940s but never published as a group, though the manuscript is prepared as a very neatly laid out chapbook of twenty songs, complete with an index and dates, presumably of composition.

This profoundly comic lyric highlights showing, doing, and living rather than telling. By implication, readers are expected to be active, to do rather than tell. In making an epigraph for her volume, Swenson finished the lyric for Blake, choosing his alternatives "seek" rather than "pain" in the first line and "He took her with a sigh" rather than "O was no deny" as the last line. She left it to the reader to decide how these choices and the resulting lyric comment on the twenty love songs that follow.

"We see – Comparatively –" Dickinson declared (*Poems: Variorum Edition* F 25; *Manuscript Books* FP 580, *Poems* JP 534), and Robert Frost, whose statue in near-conversation with that of Emily Dickinson is right

3. From "Love's Secret," *William Blake: The Complete Poems*, 134.

on Main Street in Amherst, just west of the Evergreens and Homestead (the Dickinson family houses), would echo and elaborate her observation in 1930 when asked to give a talk, "Education by Poetry," before the Amherst Alumni Council. "We still ask boys in college to think, as in the nineties, but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky," Frost said. "The metaphor whose manage we are best taught in poetry—that is all there is of thinking. It may not seem far for the mind to go but it is the mind's furthest. The richest accumulation of the ages is the noble metaphors we have rolled up" (336–337).

His subject was "Education by Poetry," and as had Dickinson and many others, Frost mused upon the fact that all thinking is metaphor. Swenson, in musing on poetry—on metaphor and its powers—as she created the twenty songs in her manuscript, cued to her reader that she is Blake's passionate audience, letting his lyric line guide her nomenclature.

Like Blake, Swenson was a keen observer, a cormorant of science—of scientific ways of thinking and their implications for poetry, for poetic apprehension of the world; like Blake, she wrote astonishing yet deceptively simple lyrics; like Blake, she always remembered that humor was essential to any serious philosophical and poetical pursuit. Alicia Ostriker writes, "What critics [specifically Anthony Hecht and X. J. Kennedy] have called Swenson's 'calculated naïveté' or her ability to become 'a child, but a highly sophisticated child' is actually that childlike ability to envision something freshly, to ask incessant questions and always be prepared for unexpected answers, required of the creative scientist. Thus she was in the habit of writing poems in the form of riddles or quasi-riddles, thoroughly examining a thing while withholding its name. These are fun, first of all, and some of her nicest work rides on the fun. . . ." (*Writing Like a Woman* 87).

Critical inquiry cannot be fruitful without remembering the importance of having fun, in call and response as in all vital human exchanges. As Blake's audience, whom did Swenson imagine to be the audience for the response she could not help but let be?

Blake's call:

Never seek to tell thy love,
 Love that never told can be;
 For the gentle wind doth move
 Silently, invisibly,

Swenson's response, "Of All Who Love You," the fifteenth song of the twenty collected in "THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE":

Of all who love you
none love as I
for they their love can tell
and need not it deny

Blake's call:

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart;
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fear
Ah, she did depart;

Swenson's eighteenth song, "IN LOVE ARE WE MADE VISIBLE":

In love we are set free
Objective bone
and flesh no longer insulate us
to ourselves alone

Blake's call:

Soon as she was gone from me
A traveler came by
Silently, invisibly
He took her with a sigh.

The last stanza of "Dreams and Ashes," Swenson's twentieth song, which is also the last stanza of the handmade volume:

Only on the unmarked page
wherever the bold mind dashes
will my fled love follow me
the rest is dream and ashes

Blake's traveler, who enacts, who calls, who shows where to follow rather than tells, gets the girl. Swenson's speaker knows that the bold mind dashing, the fled love following, making things be, lifts one out of "dream and ashes." She knows that to experience the fled love's return, "one does not, to begin with, say its name" (MWW 143).

Swenson wrote in "The Poet as Antispecialist," "At one time, wishing to clarify to myself the distinction between poetry and other modes of expression, I put down these notes":

Poetry doesn't tell; it shows. Prose tells. Poetry is not philosophy; poetry makes things be, right now. Not an idea, but a happening. It is not music, but it sounds while showing. It is not mobile; it is a thing taking place—active, interactive, in a place. It is not thought; it has to do with senses and muscles. It is not dancing, but it moves while it remains. (MWW 101)

Swenson might have been writing of herself (rather than Marianne Moore) when she declared in “A Matter of Diction,” “She continues to teach us that poetry is not constructed with ideas or sensations or revelations or passions, though these are the seductive spots and glitters, but that instead it depends on a strong, limber, complex, organic trellis of language” (MWW 88). Like Blake, like Dickinson, like all of the poets who are great thinkers, Swenson knew the physical, the emotional, the intellectual, the spiritual are all intertwined. They cannot be unhinged from one another and have the same effect as when their interdependencies are acknowledged and embraced, each and all very much part of the material world, as well as of the emotional, the intellectual, the spiritual—these worlds all inhere in one another.

Dickinson is rumored to have said that she knew poetry by the fact of its making her feel as if the top of her head would come off. We know that her most frequently addressed correspondent, Susan Dickinson, remarked in a letter to Emily Dickinson about one of her stanzas: “I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never *can* again” (*Open Me Carefully* 99). As one can see from “Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem,” the online publication of their exchanges regarding “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers,” Dickinson and her most intimate reader acknowledge the physical effects of poetry, its affective powers on audience.⁴ Yet in “Big My Secret, but It's Bandaged,” Swenson seems even more concerned with Dickinson's responses to “improvements” visited upon her poems' physical beings and writes of Dickinson's reaction to the editorial tamperings that weakened the poetic body in print: “she hated it that editors not only raided her poems and changed them but also gave them labels. They needed no names. When experiencing the full reality of something alive, one does not, to begin with, say its name” (MWW 143).

Poems such as “Bleeding,” experimental collections such as *Iconographs*, are among the reminders that Swenson regarded poetry as physical enactment. Like Dickinson, like Blake, she approached the matter of poetry and

4. See <http://emilydickinson.org/safe/zhb74b2.html>. The first critical exhibition of the Dickinson Electronic Archives was “Emily Dickinson Writing a Poem.” The archives feature critical editions of writings by the Dickinson family, poetic responses to Emily Dickinson, bibliographies, out of print and other resources.

its physicality complexly, refusing to allow her monumental understandings to devolve into critical food fights that could force unnecessary choices and false valuations. Even when you are dealing with words, Swenson knew, different choreographies of a poem's elements—its spaces, its lines, its word groups, its horizontal, vertical, even diagonal arrangements—can lead to radically different emphases and thus to contrasting, even oppositional, understandings of the meanings. Her collection *Iconographs*, actually consists of her “manuscripts . . . photo offset and reduced” and reproduced the way she made them on the typewriter—in order to “be interesting to the eye.” Part of this “playfulness with poetry” extended to the cover, which she designed herself “to suggest a giant typewriter ribbon” (MWW 119).

Swenson wrote, “I have not meant the poems to depend upon, or depend from, their shapes or their frames; these were thought of only after the whole language structure and behavior was complete in each instance. What the poems say or show, their way of doing it with language, is the main thing” (*Iconographs* 87).

At the end of *Iconographs*, a book that is made so that its size conforms to standard letter-size typewriter paper (8 ½ x 11 inches), Swenson explained in a note: “With the physical senses we meet the world and each other—a world of objects, human and otherwise, where words on a page are objects, too. The first instrument to make contact, it seems to me, and the quickest to report it, is the eye. The poems in *Iconographs*, with their profiles, or space patterns, or other graphic emphases, signal that they are to be seen, as well as read and heard, I suppose” (87). Like Blake, like Dickinson, Swenson has had much of the physicalities stripped away in print reproductions; as she says in her 1977 interview with Cornelia Draves and Mary Jane Fortunato, “you can’t usually get the printer to do what you want him to do” (MWW 119).

When I began to write this essay, I followed the standard protocols and reviewed some of Swenson's poems and volumes—*Iconographs*, *Poems to Solve*, *In Other Words*, and *Nature*, among them. As I read reviews, articles, and book chapters about her to determine how she and her work speak to the responsibilities of a poet and of poetry, the commonalities and similarities of responses from a range of audiences, with all their individualities and differences, became more and more profound. As I started to read a number of critics—such as some of my very favorites who were sitting right there in the audience in Logan, Utah, when this essay was first imagined and delivered as a talk—I thought, This is wonderful. It is, as Elizabeth Bishop might say, “marvelous to wake up together” to the wonders, the delights, of May Swenson's poetry. And as my first audience heard that June

in 2004, and as my readers can see, in working on the essay birthed by that occasion, I turned to Swenson herself, and yes, her delights, as well as her harrowing insights, such as this one in the sixth song of her volume:

The one you least suspect
is guilty

.....

You are dining with
a cannibal

.....

What if you too
dare to tamper
with the trigger
of life and death?

To conclude this particular reverie on poetry and its responsibilities, on the poet and her responsibilities, on we the people and our responsibilities, all considerations that seem ever more urgent, more now as I am writing the essay than when I delivered the talk, and probably more urgent still upon reading the essay than on its writing, I decided to go to a particular set of May Swenson's manuscripts, those of a prose poem published in *Quarterly West*, and consider that work in light of her essay "A Poem Happens to Me" and the importance of audience:

I do not know why I write poems or what makes me write them. Often, when I want to *write a poem*, I cannot—or, if I stubbornly sit down and write something anyway, I discover sooner or later that it is *not* a poem. I suspect this may be because, by concerning oneself with making a poem, one is so conscious of going through the correct motions of doing so, that the spirit of the creation refuses to enter the hard, premeditated clay, and, when it is finished, all the physical parts may have been admirably fashioned, but no passion is there to animate the figure.

It does not breathe.

It is like making a violin complete in every way, except that one can't get music from it.

On the other hand, it sometimes happens that I am unwilling to write the poem but it forces itself from me without permission. A poem that happens in this way will often be inexplicable

to myself, as to source, content, or significance. Months later, or years later, such a poem may “dawn on me,” and I know for the first time what it is I have written. Sometimes I agree with my own observation, and sometimes I think it absurd. (MWW 75)

Emily Dickinson asked Thomas Wentworth Higginson if her verse was “alive,” if it “breathed” (*Letters of Emily Dickinson*, letter 260). The witness provided by Swenson’s manuscripts as she worked through “At the Poetry Reading” suggests that the poem forced itself on Swenson and that audience was a key technology in facilitating its delivery. The manuscripts depicting that poem’s evolution tell quite a story.

The prose poem begins in a handwritten draft, placed and dated “L.A. Feb 18 '77.” With Ann Stafford, she attended a reading by James Merrill. In the poem, she is part of his audience, but the first thing she records is not his subject, nor his manner of presentation, but the “dark red” glossy “nails” that “are tulips” of another audience member. Described as “hard red-purple cheeks,” “large cherry-colored scarabs,” the “ten notched precious articles exquisitely marked” center the tableau—the painting in words that absorb a learned audience member who cannot seem to focus on Merrill’s presentation, though she emphatically declares, “But I really love his work.”

Her
~~the~~ ^{art} nails ~~to~~ ^{are} tulips--
 or that dark red that gloss-
 self or cheeks or hard ^{red-purple} ~~hard~~ ^{wood} ~~convex~~ -
 but ~~most~~ ^{of} ~~the~~ beetle-books, the sheer
 or ~~other~~ ^{size} of those large cherry colored
 scarabs, and her ^{right} hands lay posed
 loosely "bobbed" in her perfect lap
 so that the ten notched precious
 articles exquisitely worked would not
 be marred
 by a rub or snag or nasty acid-
 out, or ^{actual} ~~of~~ ^{touch}. The display
 well-lighted by from overhead in
 the lecture hall, lay close up, a
 still life in the row ahead at a
 slant just right for long contemplation
 while the lecture droned ^{from} the
 platform up ~~at~~

THAT NEVER TOLD CAN BE

AT THE POETRY READING

A gray suit. A grave voice. The hour seems an age. The lectern is a base on which is mounted the stodgy bust of a terribly famous poet. My eyes furtively slip among the seated congregation and alight upon a little stage I can see at a slant, down front in the second row, lit, as it happens, from the lectern above. On a black velvet lap, smooth palms are loosely basketed, being held very still. Extending the ends of the fingers, ten matched ovals, of a marvelous sharpness and length, have the gloss of tulip petals, or of those big cherry-colored beetles with convex backs. They are kept carefully apart so as not to be marred.

A serene face. chin uptilted, is on guard over the tableau. Back erect beside her escort (he also seated rigid and correct in creaseless suit) she divides her beam of attention between the intoning mouth behind the micriphone up there, and the white Still Life in her lap. I contemplate the tableau on the little stage with increasing admiration, and I make these notes, not having to look at, or listen to, what tediously proceeds on the large stage:

The rare, the sacrificial art of growing nails. Harder than gardening, than embroidery, than sport. Demanding discipline almost saintlike. Asks restraint, asks instinctive avoidance of contact, or of the slightest unplanned gesture. An occupation personal and dedicated, a work that can't be hired; constant supervision is required. Constant love and care called for by the artist. The craft consists simply in letting them grow, and without distortion or deviation, in order to develop precise prefigured outlines, each one, so that separate, yet sibling, miniature masterpieces result.

But the growth never halts. Although the goal is perfection, as soon as reached, it shifts. Each day the ten must be restored, reshaped, recolored, buffed, blown on, carefully refloated in air to dry. Then kept intact, controlled, not to injure themselves or each other, not to grope in forgetful, impulsive frolic. Such letting-go might cause damage costing long and critical repair.

larger
print as
above

I make these notes, and do not have to look at, or listen to, what tediously proceeds upon the stage up there. I list the rules the art requires:

1. Never scratch.
2. Don't shake hands.
3. At table, handle cutlery with care. In fact, for safety's sake, eat rarely.
4. To dress or disrobe, employ a maid. Especially so for bathing, brushing hair, or any self-care using the hands as tools.
5. Obviously taboo: cooking, or other household chores.
6. Exercise—golf, tennis, any game except, perhaps, bridge or backgammon—should not be chanced.
7. For driving, best use a chauffeur.
8. Recommended for sleeping: padded, lined-with-lightweight-flannel gloves, and ask the maid gently to fit them on. CAUTION: Erotion can overturn the strict practice on which accomplishment depends.
- Thus, 9. Never sleep

Martha Nell Smith

with anyone. Or with any thing. Such as a too-solid pillow, a cloth doll, a cat. 10. Do not caress any creature or object, not even yourself. Always remember, your immaculate breakable claws require your prime love and guardianship. 11. Miscellaneous Cautions: (Add to them as experience dictates)— (a) Playing piano not allowed. (b) Visiting retreat or spa is good. (c) No hiking. (Well, maybe, if wearing flats—unless nails of the feet are also being crafted.) (d) Swimming is O.K.

She handles her hands in her lap as if they are priceless, her awareness constant as to their posture, wherever her eyes may be fixed. Kept slightly apart, the fingers with their fresh groomed nails, inch-long slick points reflecting light, empurpled, gleaming, are pampered pets, posed in graceful tableau, ten matched and brilliant cameos that may not touch.

Rule 12: Do not clasp in prayer.

Ripples of movement in the audience, a loosening and shifting of heads and necks, murmurs of exclamation. Finally, the applause—polite at first, then vigorous. Everyone automatically smacks palms together. The velvet lap unhooks its knees, the fabulous hands lift. With exquisite slow-motion pretense at meeting palm to palm, they noiselessly clap.

The occasion of the poetry reading becomes an occasion for a reverie on poetry and art, and Swenson's characteristic good humor inflects her analytical reflection on artistic production, as she compares the staging of poetic language with the staging of the trivial art of manicure. Through ten different drafts, Swenson describes the great care the elegant audience member has taken to insure her perfectly sculpted nails. Seven out of ten of the drafts, produced between 1977 and 1986, begin by focusing Swenson's audience on those nails. The seemingly ludicrous comparison of a monumental poet and his work that "breathes" and will breathe for generations upon generations to come with an anonymous audience member and her easily defaceable, perpetually degradable "art" is both hilarious and profound.

A superficial reading might lead one to wonder why Swenson is being uncharacteristically uncharitable, even a little mean. But her first draft of this prose poem makes clear that her subject is the audience "seen while listening to a poetry reading." Thus it is not May Swenson's own judgment but one "seen," one that pronounces the "presentation by a terribly famous poet," in this case James Merrill, "tedious." Swenson reports what she thinks she observes—a woman who can appreciate only the art of her own nails, not the art of Merrill's words.

Important, too, is that the poem that evolved into the polished typescript with instructions for the printer was no longer a prose poem about the particular poetry reading that forced the poem into being by the particular

poet Merrill. Rather, the typescript poem evolved through numerous hybrid typescript and handwritten drafts into a prose poem about the pomp and circumstance and self-importance of some audiences and some literary events. The poem is about a fear of experience itself, a fear of living.

It is about a fear of the fact that, as Muriel Rukeyser remarked:

Art is not a world, but a knowing of the world. Art prepares us.

Art is practiced by the artist and the audience. It is not a means to an end, unless that end is the total imaginative experience. . . .

Art and nature are imitations, not of each other, but of the same thing—both images of the real, the spectral and vivid reality that employs all means. If we fear it in art, we fear it in nature, and our fear brings it on ourselves in the most unanswerable ways.

The implications for society and for the individual are far-reaching.

People want this speech, this immediacy. They need it. The fear of poetry is a complicated and civilized repression of that need. We wish to be told, in the most memorable way, what we have been meaning all along. (26)

Sometimes the subject at hand bears repeating. Because of murky, unclear subjects, language is repeatedly emptied, eviscerated, stolen from us in our public sphere. “Language is not only a tool in poetry; it is its very being. In a poem, Subject is not presented by means of language; but Language is the thing presented with the aid of subject.” The subject here calls our attention to the importance of poetry and what is missing when audiences and poets are there to tell, to be seen, to receive plaudits rather than to let poetry do its work, that of “sacred mathematics” (*Iconographs* 86), “to incorporate infinitude and set up comprehensible models of it within our little minds” (*MWW* 93), to give “form a body” (*MWW* 77), and “help” us “stay human” (*MWW* 101).

So what happens when the poet adopts “an un-self-centered attitude”—one “with the object of understanding his audience and revealing it to itself and himself,” one that does not say “Look, here I am!” but “See, there you,” the audience, “are...”? Occupying that position and inhabiting that sense of audience as technology, as breath, a poet reminds an audience of our connectedness—flesh to spirit; lover to lover; friend to friend; friend to foe. We are not abstractions in this material world, and we need all the help we can get to “stay human.” A poet’s greatest responsibility is to teach audiences that, and, as Swenson well knew, such learning is not philosophical but experiential. Swenson’s brood, the many children she recorded in her family’s book, repeat over and over, “See, there you are, human.”