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## Body My House

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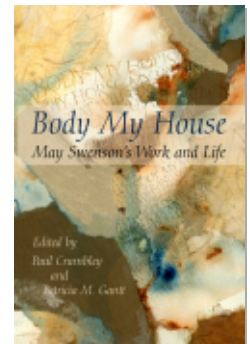
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# MAY SWENSON AND OTHER ANIMALS

## Her Poetics of Natural Selection

*Paul Crumbley*

The title of this essay reflects May Swenson's sense of herself as an animal and the fact that she often wrote of other animals as fellow members of an ever-evolving natural world. In an interview with Karla Hammond, Swenson observed that "Animals aren't human beings, but human beings are animals," stating further that "People should not lose their animal nature."<sup>1</sup> The reference to natural selection is a response to Swenson's hard-minded view of life and poetry; she was a pragmatist who sought to be part of what worked, whether through her art or through her personal relationships with the human and non-human world. She took great delight in breaking down conceptual barriers of all sorts in an effort to unite disparate sectors of her own psyche as well as to expand the scope of her interaction with the universe around her. Through the representative sampling of her poetry that follows, Swenson communicates her loving embrace of the animal in herself, her perception of human characteristics even in vegetative matter, and her artistic appropriation of the most fundamental stuff of life, the DNA molecule.

Rozanne Knudson, Swenson's partner for the last twenty-three years of her life and the executor of her literary estate, stated that Swenson's poem "The Centaur"<sup>2</sup> "reveals her belief that she was part animal

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1. From page 121 of *Made with Words*, a collection of interviews with and works by Swenson. Hereafter *MWW*.
  2. "The Centaur" appears in *May Swenson's New & Selected Things Taking Place* (hereafter, *TTP*), 237.

herself.”<sup>3</sup> Swenson herself confirmed this belief in an interview with Cornelia Draves and Mary Jane Fortunato, in which she discussed “The Centaur,” observing both that she does “have a lot of animal poems” and that she “always felt [her]self to be an animal” (MWW 114). This widely anthologized Swenson poem provides a good way to begin thinking about the poet’s life, as it presents an older speaker reflecting on her experience as a ten-year-old girl playing by herself in the field behind her house, then returning to the house where her mother urges her to behave in a more conventionally feminine fashion. If we accept that the speaker is Swenson, or someone very much like her, the poem can be read as the poet’s commentary on her childhood. Swenson encouraged this association of speaker with poet when she noted in the Draves and Fortunato interview that the poem “is a childhood memory” and the “girl in this poem . . . is myself” (MWW 113). The setting is indeed the field behind the family home that extended to an irrigation canal, a frequent resort for all the Swenson children.

Swenson’s use of this setting suggests a degree of autobiographical intent that is further supported by three distinct features of the poem, each of which provides insight into Swenson’s early life. The first is the girl’s use of a male tool, the “brother’s jack-knife” (line 10), that for the older poet becomes the female appropriation of male power, both symbolic and sexual, that clearly bears on the female writer’s use of the phallic pen. The second is the girl’s identification with the horse, so that she becomes both female rider and male horse: “I was the horse and the rider, / and the leather I slapped to his rump // spanked my own behind” (38–40). This language reveals the young poet’s immersion in imaginative experience while also foreshadowing the fusion of self and other, as well as the gender play that so delighted the mature poet. The third is the girl’s encounter with her mother, who identifies and corrects the girl’s departure from conventional gender norms:

*What’s that in your pocket?* she said.  
*Just my knife.* It weighted down my pocket  
 and stretched my dress awry.

*Go tie back your hair,* said my mother,  
 and *why is your mouth all green?*  
*Rob Roy, he pulled some clover*  
*as we crossed the field,* I told her.  
 (58–64).

3. R. R. Knudson, *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson* (hereafter *Pen*), 106, 22.

Here we see the insistent mother affirming the importance of conventional gender roles without condemning the imaginative play that provoked the young girl's transgression, implying that imaginative play is fine as long as convention is respected. From the perspective of the older poet, what perhaps stands out most in these concluding lines is the solid rhyme that forms the only end rhyme in the only couplet in the poem's only four-line stanza. This special emphasis on the words "I told her" points to the older poet's fascination with the openness of this communication. In words that convey both uninhibited disclosure and mutual respect, the speaker marvels that at that early age she did in fact tell her mother and, in doing so, literally had the last word on the matter of imagination and gender identity.

Swenson's childhood really was characterized by a rich and abundant imaginative experience that included exposure to nature, free and independent self-expression, and reverence for the social codes that framed life in Mormon-dominated Logan, Utah. As Mormon converts and immigrants from Sweden, May's parents enforced respect for the values of their adopted culture. At the same time, though, as the oldest of ten children, May was granted a measure of adult autonomy early in life. She was the only child with a room of her own (*Pen* 34); her father made her a writing desk,<sup>4</sup> and when she turned twelve he made her twelve little books with blank pages that would become her first diaries. May's parents and her siblings recognized and supported May's life as a writer from its earliest emergence until her death.

Swenson's interest in writing surfaced early, and quickly became a major force in her life. Her first publication came in 1929, when her short story "Christmas Day" won the Vernon Short Story Medal and appeared in *The Grizzly*, Logan High School's student newspaper. Her first poetry publication appeared when she was student at Utah State University, then known as Utah Agricultural College. Her poem "Three Hues of Melody" was published in the campus literary magazine, *The Scribble*. After graduating from college in 1934, Swenson worked as a journalist in Salt Lake City for a little over a year before moving to New York in 1936, where she sought to make a life for herself as a writer. While traveling east, she wrote a letter to one of her literary heroes, Thomas Wolfe, in which she stated, "Oh Thomas Wolfe, I shall come to your city—my CITY. I am coming into the thick of it. I crouch like a panther. A snarl meaning

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4. Reference regarding her father's desk is from R. R. Knudson and Suzanne Bigelow, eds., *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos* (hereafter, *MS*), 27.

sweetness and rage rises in me” (*Pen* 41). Here Swenson provided another of her many characteristic associations of herself with an animal. In this instance, the association is directly linked to her sense of being and becoming a writer. She asserted that she was willing to enter the New York literary jungle and that she would fight if she must.

Swenson’s first thirteen years in New York were not easy and she was compelled to scrap her way to literary fame. Her breakthrough came after years of rejections and financial hardship, when *The Saturday Review of Literature* published her poem “Haymaking” on August 20, 1949 (*Pen* 66). Shortly thereafter, Swenson became friends with Elizabeth Bishop, worked for James Laughlin of New Directions, and met Howard Moss of the *New Yorker* (MS 57–60). Swenson would go on to publish fifty-nine poems in the *New Yorker* (MS 58). Her first book, *Another Animal*, came out in 1954. It would be the first of eleven books of poetry and one of four volumes with titles expressing her abiding interest in the evolutionary process, the fusion of human and animal experience, and the way language itself participates in creation. The other three titles are *A Cage of Spines* (1958), *To Mix With Time* (1963), and *New & Selected Things Taking Place* (1978). On the strength of these works and the prominence she achieved within the world of American letters, Swenson served as chancellor for the Academy of American Poets from 1980 until her death in 1989 and won many awards, including a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in 1987, which she won in the same year she was given an honorary doctorate in letters by her alma mater, Utah State University (MS 115–21).

Swenson’s deep engagement in evolution and what might productively be thought of as her poetics of natural selection is vividly expressed in a May 29, 1951, letter she wrote to her father. This letter was written at a pivotal moment in Swenson’s life as a writer—shortly after her successful emergence from thirteen years of financial hardship and artistic struggle. Swenson had by this time seen her first poems published in prestigious national poetry venues, but she hadn’t yet placed any poems in *The New Yorker* or published her first book. As the letter indicates, though, she was confident that the talent she had privately nurtured in the face of seemingly endless rejections was at last being recognized. This letter gives a glimpse of Swenson, now age thirty-eight, confidently describing her artistic self-understanding at the very point in her career when she has made the transition from self-doubt and frustration to self-assurance and artistic success. The language of the letter crystallizes the sense of artistic purpose that runs through all of her work but that she rarely expresses with the clarity she provides here when explaining herself to her father.

Her respect for both her father and her mother are evident in every word, as is her awareness that her parents are devout Mormons, who view Utah as the “promised land” and subscribe to a conservative social system firmly grounded in patriarchal ideology:

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. . . .

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. . . .

(Letter to Daniel Arthur Swenson 1–2)

One of the most impressive features of this letter is Swenson's emphatic desire to solidify family ties by representing herself as the newest embodiment of the family spirit, a spirit that she links not only to the human spirit, but to the continuously unfolding spirit of creation itself, which she would identify later in her life as the evolutionary advance of mind Pierre Teilhard de Chardin referred to as the "noösphere." (*Human Phenomenon* 247 n. 9).

Crucial to Swenson's self-representation in this letter is the way she explains her difference from her family in terms of evolution. Her artistic creation, she argues, stands in opposition to her father's chosen form of creativity; she "stands outside the fold" while he stands within; her beliefs and attitudes appear not merely different but entirely separate from those of her family. Her writing, however, declares that this undeniable opposition is apparent only and not enduring, certainly not ontological, when viewed within the broad historical context of her role as the genetic and spiritual offspring of her parents. This logic would also apply retroactively to her earlier statement about the artificiality of art that she bases on the opposition of art to life, an opposition that she qualifies by conflating "life" with what is "natural" and claiming that the artist rebels against life by refusing to "ride *with* life." Swenson's point in both instances is that opposition is never static but always part of a dynamic growth process—what she refers to in the context of art as the artist's "synthetic creation." When writing about her seeming opposition to her parents' way of life, she affirms that her conduct is not finally oppositional at all, but rather a product of the "evolutionary impulse" she shares with them.

Swenson's words tell us that the difference between opposition and shared purpose comes down to point of view and proximity to the experience described: when seen close up, opposition seems intractable, unbridgeable; but with distance the chasm of opposition closes and opposing actions look like alternative routes to the same goal. This is in large part because what Swenson chooses to view as significant is what works, what may be thought of as those few among our many actions that take us in productive directions. From the vantage of who we are now, we can see the path from who we were to our present selves as a sequence of productive impulses—especially if we have just felt the first hints of artistic recognition. All the miscues and unproductive choices pale because they have no place in the causal chain that leads to us as we are now. The artist's rebellious oppositions to the supposedly natural course of life cease to be oppositional when they work, when the marginal is absorbed by the mainstream and the current of life is fractionally altered. With the benefit

of distance and the confidence born of recent success, Swenson can state that her relocation east from Utah is the same as her parents' relocation west from Sweden.

For Swenson, language was the crucible through which difference could emerge as shared purpose. As a poet, she discovered in language the full range of her experience: her participation in the natural world, her fascination with science, her many loves—romantic and familial—her enthusiasm for sport, her delight in puzzles, her obsession with philosophical questions, her engagement with the political issues of her moment. Through a process closely resembling natural selection, Swenson pragmatically built on the past by diligently searching for what works in language. In her essay “The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age,” Swenson described the “the poetic experience” as “one of constant curiosity, skepticism, and testing—astonishment, disillusionment, renewed discovery, re-illumination. It amounts to a virtual compulsion to probe with the senses into the complex actuality of all things. . .” (148). This interplay of astonishment and disillusionment, discovery and skepticism that accompany the poet's compulsive testing of language to discover newer and richer expressions of meaning, strikingly parallels the process of natural selection Charles Darwin describes in terms of species adaptation in *The Origin of Species*: “As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in a manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying condition of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be *naturally selected*” (47).

Swenson speaks directly to the question of selection and her wish to position herself at the peak point of the struggle for existence in her essay “The Poet as Antispecialist.” There she describes poetry as “based in a craving to get through the curtains of things as they *appear* to things as they *are* and then into a larger, wilder space as they *are becoming*” (91). In these words about poetry, Swenson echoes the language she used in her letter to her father where she pointed out that apparent differences in life style were bridged by the experience of becoming that she referred to as their shared “evolutionary impulse.”

Many people intimate with Swenson and her work have commented on the correspondence her work has with the process of creation. Mona Van Duyn describes Swenson's poetry as “an art that comes as close as any I know to what I like to think must have been the serious fun, the gorgeous mix of play and purpose of Creation itself” (154). John Hollander



observes that Swenson's unrelenting "preoccupation with finding emblems in natural fact" differs from either the "Darwinian or Lamarckian causal story" by virtue of her moral purpose (294–95). And this moral presence is worth noting, as it points to Swenson's investment of herself in the selection process, a self that carries with it all the value laden desires any culturally situated subject would be expected to have. At her funeral in 1989, May's brother Roy recalled May's having uttered aphoristic observations about life that now serve double duty as both philosophy of life and artistic credo. "Life is a mystery," she told Roy. "We must not give ourselves airs. We are not the apex of creation. It is all evolving. We don't know what the answers will be" (MS 124). May reiterates this fundamental sense of humility in "A Note about *Iconographs*": "It has always been my tendency to let each poem 'make itself'—to develop, in process of becoming, its own individual physique" (86). Even though she may have been seeking answers from her unique point of view and proceeding with a moral purpose, Swenson's aim was never to proclaim the answers; hers was a life dedicated to the forward wave of creation, to delight in the mystery of selection, to let go of the unselected, to ride the current of the new.

Once we see that Swenson was dedicated to the emergence of new life through language, we can understand why she titled her first book *Another Animal*, her second *A Cage of Spines*, her third *To Mix With Time*, and her tenth *New & Selected Things Taking Place*. Language was for Swenson inseparable from any understanding of creation or humanity's role in it. She said this quite plainly in a journal entry from May 1965. "My theory: That the universe began to exist at the point when human language was born. That it began simultaneously with its *expression* through thought & word—through recognition & naming & defining & relating. . . . Human recognition and expression concomitantly created the past, the history of existence, with the present, and it projects the future" (qtd. in Zona 127). Swenson's version of the structuralist's insight that experience is indistinguishable from language helps explain why she sees poetry as the proper vehicle for participation in the unfinished business of evolution.

Of Swenson's many poems that celebrate the ongoing process of creation, none does so with more grace and humor than "Deciding," a poem she wrote in 1954, three years after she wrote the letter to her father identifying her own "evolutionary impulse." This poem makes playful use of a prominent regional symbol, the potato so commonly associated with Idaho, as a means of parodying the limiting force of culturally constructed norms that treat identity as a preexisting language inscribed on the body. Swenson effectively loosens the restrictive force of the "natural" by means

of laughter, utilizing what Judith Butler identifies as “a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects” (146). By revealing the contingency of bedrock cultural assumptions, Swenson seeks to create a linguistic space for the emergence of a new sort of selfhood. Her poem cracks the seemingly seamless surface of cultural logic, enabling the imagination to contemplate new forms of human expression.

Deciding

Deciding to go on digging doing it  
what they said outside wasn't any use  
Inside hiding it made it get ambitious  
Like a potato in a dark bin  
it grew white grabbers for light  
out of its navel eyes not priding  
itself much just deciding  
it wasn't true inside what they said  
outside those bumps were

All humped alike dumped inside  
slumped in burlap said  
roots are no good out of ground  
a fruit's crazy to want to be a flower  
Besides it's sin changing the given shape  
Bursting the old brown skin is suicide  
Wishing to taste like a tulip  
sip colored light  
outside thumps said it wasn't right

Deciding to keep on striding  
from inside bursting the bin-side  
poking out wishes for delicious opposites  
turning blind eyes to strong fingers  
touching meaning more than sight  
the navel scars of weaning  
used for something finally  
Deciding to go on digging doing it

(*Nature* 36)

Here is the uprooted potato framed in the furious play of opposition and fusion that most characterizes Swenson's best work. As readers, we are

simultaneously inside and outside the potato bin, worrying about what is said, assuming the posture of the speaker and the listener, knowing and refusing the high stakes of sin, ambitiously following the trajectory of change, contemplating a decision but like Prufrock, not deciding so much as thinking about deciding and all the while digging the action, like a beat poet rooted in time but not deciding, using the lingo but not wholly subscribing to the culture, thinking about blooming like a tulip, transmuting through the heterosexual matrix of round fruit, navel, eyes and flower, mutating to “white grabbers,” bursting skin, bold striding, and “strong fingers”—all part of a continuous deciding, a coming out, a sexual dance, a decision endlessly strung out in time, just like creation.

These are all features of the classic Swenson scene of action: self as experiment expressed fully in the ongoing action of language, distrusting the static, restless and complete while in fluid movement, all decisions contemplated—none achieved. That the scene should be sensual, erotic, and deeply intellectual is absolutely characteristic. In one of her first poems, “The Maiden in the Grass,” an unpublished poem that Alicia Ostriker elsewhere in this book describes as demonstrating that Whitman’s earthiness found a home in Swenson, the speaker beckons the world seductively:

I kiss thee, little hot Grass..  
 I creep up against thee, yearning stone..  
 Have me, wind..  
 I turn, I part my garment.<sup>5</sup>

Composed in 1936 when she was twenty-three and still in Utah, the poem effectively captures the impetuous daring that would lead Swenson to New York while also acknowledging the sensual appetite that has led Ostriker to refer to Swenson in the title of her essay in this book as “Whitman’s Daughter.”

In “The Truth Is Forced,” a poem from much later in Swenson’s life (1961), Swenson displays the same sensual immersion, only this time she explains how the poet’s ability to enter “the skins / of every creature” forms part of her poetic manifesto:

One must be honest somewhere. I wish  
 to be honest in poetry.  
 With the written word.

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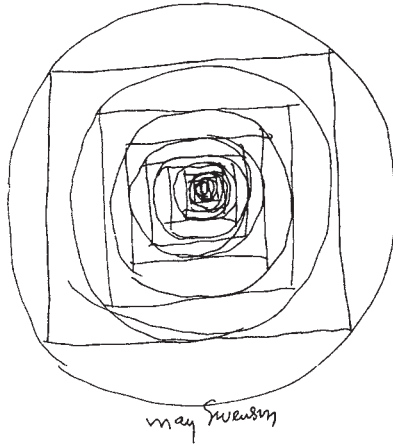
5. Published here by permission of the Swenson Estate.

Where I can say and cross out  
and say over and 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,  
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.  
(*Nature* 11–12)

Mark Doty's observation that Swenson was a masterful manipulator of the "veils and swathings of language" clearly applies to this poem (92). As he puts it, "Eros often lies in what is withheld, at least for a while. . . Just so, the naked body of the poem may be made infinitely more alluring by the right negligee, the elegant strategies of concealment and promise." After all, Doty asks, "What is less sexy than a nudist camp?"

This aspect of Swenson, her reticent display, aligns her less with Whitman, perhaps, than with Emily Dickinson, whose "sumptuous Destitution" (Poem 1404 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*) more closely resembles Swenson's erotics of concealment than the "Magnifying and applying" of Whitman's "Song of Myself" ("Song" l.1026 *Leaves of Grass*). Like Dickinson, Swenson does "Tell all the truth but tell it slant –" (Poem 1263 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*) though she may most resemble Dickinson in her devotion to the interrelationship of win and loss, harmony and opposition. When Dickinson writes, "We lose – because we win – / Gamblers – recollecting which – / Toss their dice again!" (Poem 28 *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*) she sets the stage for Swenson's ceaseless gambling with language. Each of her poetic strip teases is also a tossing of the evolutionary dice where she repeatedly risks discovering a dummy in her search for the real. She hints at this in her letter to her father when she acknowledges that "every sensitive human being is confronted with the necessity

of learning by himself, of discovering through experience.” Her poetics of natural selection demands that losing be seen as winning, and that life be lived most fully in the nude, when exposure is greatest, something that happens through her verbal dance of veils. This is the way Swenson forces truth. Not by main force, but in the greenhouse of language where the sun of human intelligence draws forth the flower, forcing the latent life of the imagination to compete for cultural space.



As Swenson’s self-portrait makes clear, there was nothing static in Swenson’s self-image. Through a simple arrangement of boxes and circles, she depicts a personality expanding outward. Were we able to tilt the portrait on its horizontal axis rather than staring into it as into a well, with a reflection infinitely receding in ever smaller telescoping repetition, we would more clearly see that the image also projects progress forward as through time. This is not a smooth advance, however; it is composed of gaps, wherein expansion suddenly transpires, as if the movement from one moment to another escapes visual delineation, just as natural selection, the engine of evolution, leaps forward. Life continuously expands through the process of survival, but the crucible of change is chaotic; each new stage is a sudden materialization that clearly builds on what came before, but does so mysteriously. In this way, Swenson’s self-portrait incorporates key visual features that abstractly represent evolutionary process, thus reiterating Swenson’s view of her own life as a sequence of oppositions graced by periodic breakthroughs that replace difference with the realization of shared purpose.

Swenson’s poem “The DNA Molecule” may be her most ambitious

attempt to place poetry in direct communication with living matter. As in “The Truth Is Forced,” nakedness plays an important role in this poem also, only in this instance nakedness is specifically addressed through the speaker’s reference to Marcel Duchamp’s painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Of course, DNA is also a form of nakedness, as it is the bare minimum of matter that codes what covers it. Here we also have Swenson clearly writing in a manner that draws on Duchamp (though changing the gender of the nude) to establish at the outset the poem’s concern with the way artistic creation enters conversation with biological reproduction. Swenson, who thought of her poems as her children (*Pen* 80), here presents us with a speaker who gives new form to the molecule that is in fact the genetic foundation of all life. The visual shape Swenson gave the poem in *Iconographs*—her type arrangement that mimics the double helix—is the first aspect of that version of the poem that we perceive, proclaiming Swenson’s aim of creating the act of creation. The reading that proceeds from this point unfolds through carefully modulated shifts in perspective framed by the double-helix image, pushing the reading experience toward maximum fluidity, blurring the lines between scientific fact, artistic rendering, and the act of conceiving creation within the imagination. By this means the reader is situated alongside the scientist, whose words appear in quotation marks, the speaker and Swenson herself as we collectively commune with the molecule.

The poem’s sequential organization clarifies its concern with the act of creation. In the first four of the poem’s six sections—represented below in the more conventional stanza arrangement Swenson devised for the version of the poem published in *New & Selected Things Taking Place*—the speaker describes the molecule, instructing us at times with directives that are supplemented with scientific quotations.

#### The DNA Molecule

The DNA Molecule is The Nude Descending a Staircase,  
a circular one. See the undersurfaces of the spiral  
treads and the spaces in between. She is descending  
and, at the same time, ascending, and she moves  
around herself. For she is the staircase, “a proto-  
plasmic framework that twists and turns.” She is a  
double helix, mounting and dismounting around the  
swivel of her imaginary spine.

The Nude named DNA can be constructed as a model with matches and a ribbon of tape. Be sure to use only four colors on two white strands of twistable tape.

“Only matches of complementary colors may be placed opposite each other. The pairs are to be Red and Green, and Yellow and Blue.” Make your model as high as the Empire State Building, and you have an acceptable replica of The Nude. But (and this is harder) you must make her move in a continuous coil, an alpha helix, a double spiral downward and upward at once, and you must make her increase while, at the same time, occupying the same field. She must be made to maintain “a basic topography,” changing, yet remaining stable, if she is to perform her function, which is to produce and reproduce the microsphere.

Such a sphere is invisible to, but omnipresent in, the naked eye of The Nude. It contains a “central region and an outer membrane,” making it both able to divide and to make exact copies of itself without limit. The Nude “has the capacity for replication and transcription” of all genesis. She ingests and regurgitates the genetic material, it being the material of her own cell-self. From single she becomes double, and from double single. As a woman ingests the demon sperms and, with the same membrane, regurgitates the mitotic double of herself upon the slide of time, so The DNA Molecule produces, with a little pop, at the waistline of its viscous drop, a new microsphere the same size as herself, which proceeds singly to grow in order to divide and double itself. So, from single to double and double to single, and mounting while descending, she expands while contracts, she proliferates while disappearing, at both of her ends.

Remember that Red can only be opposite Green, and Blue opposite Yellow. Remember that the complimentary pairs of matches must differ slightly in length, “for nature’s pairs can be made only with units whose structures permit an interplay of forces between partners.”

*Paul Crumbley*

I fixed a Blue match opposite a Red match of the same length, pointed away from the center on the double strand of tape. I saw laid a number of eggs on eggs on the sticky side of a twig. I saw a worm with many feet grow out of an egg. The worm climbed the twig, a single helix, and gobbled the magnified edge of a leaf in quick enormous bites. It then secreted out of itself a gray floss with which it wrapped itself, tail first, and so on, until it had completely muffled and encased itself, head too, as in a mummy sack.

I saw plushy, iridescent wings push moistly out of the pouch. At first glued together, they began to part. On each wing I saw a large blue eye, open forever in the expression of resurrection. The new Nude released the flanges of her wings, stretching herself to touch at all points the outermost rim of the noösphere. I saw that, for her body, from which the wings expanded, she had retained the worm.

(*TTP* 92–93)

Stanzas one and three are primarily descriptive, while stanzas two and four are largely instructive. Stanza one introduces the double helix as seen from the outside and stanza three examines it from the inside. Stanzas two and four deal with the parts of the molecule and how they must be assembled; these stanzas function as instructions for physical construction. Once the object of study has been comprehended according to available artistic and scientific precedent, the speaker launches her own creation, in stanzas five and six, seeking to generate new life beyond the cutting edge of art and science. The poem tells us that this last step is always solitary, predicated on what is known but gambling on an isolated innovation that may or may not survive the crucible of natural selection. The word “resurrection” in the final stanza is significant as it signals the transformation of life achieved through trial. In this instance, the speaker’s gamble with the rules pays off and the trial is survived: a “new Nude” (line 60) unfolds, and we are told that she is a perfect fit: “her wings . . . touch at all points the outmost rim of the / noösphere” (61–63). Crucially, this new creature is both the DNA nude we have seen before and something totally new. As the last line of the poem states, “she had retained the worm” (64). This addition marks an expansion of the sphere of life that returns us to



the point that opened the poem: with the speaker observing Duchamp's *Nude*. The speaker's violation of the pattern, like Swenson's own departure from Utah and the lifestyle of her parents, created the new pattern, the deviant countercurrent that successfully expands the mainstream.

As was the case in her 1951 letter to her father, Swenson carefully manages perspective in the final sections of the poem to illuminate the way a marked departure from the normative pattern precedes the emergence of new life. This is accomplished at the beginning of the fifth stanza where the now isolated speaker takes the only direct action in the poem: she violates the rules by "fix[ing] a blue match opposite a red / match of the same length" (47-48). This departure from the poem's own norms is reinforced by other changes in the poem that set these final lines apart as distinctly different from the poem up to this point: the speaker separates from the reader and the scientist, the language tense shifts from present and future to past tense, and the poem magnifies the field of vision. Instead of describing a nude the size of the Empire State Building, the poem now directs our attention to "eggs on the / sticky side of a twig" that become a worm that forms "a single / helix" (49-50) then gobbles "the magnified edge of a leaf" and disappears into "a mummy sack" (52, 56). This is the moment of greatest tension, when only half a helix has materialized, signaling that progress toward new life is underway but not yet complete. Significantly, we cannot see what happens at this point; all we can do is passively watch through the speaker's eyes as she recalls what she saw emerge from the crucible of selection.

The final stanza continues the speaker's narration in the past tense, so that we hear what amounts to a report on the isolated act of creation that successfully translates difference into unity. The most distinctive feature of the final stanza is its dramatic telescoping of the visual field that occurs as the "new Nude" rises out of the chrysalis, opens her wings, and expands the sphere of life. Initially her wings unfurl to show "a large blue eye" on each that is "open forever / in the expression of resurrection" (59-60). The eye on each wing designates both the butterfly's evolutionary defense mechanism and the linguistic pun on the distinct "I" that is this new creation, a self distinct from any other. The biological fact of the butterfly compounds with the insect's traditional symbolic links to rebirth, psyche, and artistic expression to reassert the interrelationship of science, art, and individual that has operated throughout the poem. Once this "new Nude" is introduced, though, the wings become important not because of their novelty, but through the perfect completion of their evolutionary role. The poem immediately directs our attention to

the nude's precise fit, her "stretching herself / to touch at all points the outermost rim of the / noösphere" (61–63), which is to say that she survives because she fits the sphere of life. She lives because she works. The final lines assert that her importance is not due to her novelty but rather to her function in filling the evolutionary niche. And at this point the allusion to Teilhard de Chardin's "noösphere" is also noteworthy, as by means of this term he designated the final stage of evolution, the stage he describes in language drawn from Julian Huxley as "*nothing less than evolution become conscious of itself*" (*Phenomenon of Man* 220). This evolutionary self-consciousness is evident in the lines that follow, when we are told that "her body" (63), the seat of all difference from what surrounds her, is not distinctive for its contribution to what she has become, but for having "retained the worm" (64), a feature of her previous state. The poem ends by asking us to look backward, placing the "new Nude" in the context of linear history, her body bearing the imprint of what she was, thus bridging the gap between difference and sameness and drawing our attention to the way life evolves when isolated experiments match the needs of natural selection.

"The DNA Molecule" can finally be understood as an optimistic poem that traces to successful completion the action that the poem "Deciding" contemplates but does not realize. There is also optimism in "Deciding," but in that poem the optimism registers in the speaker's ability to go on "digging it" even when unsure of what the outcome of her digging it will be. Swenson's poem "Teleology" spells out the difficulty of finding the passage from the present to the future that is sought in "Deciding" and achieved in "The DNA Molecule":

Teleology

The eyes look front in humans.

Horse or dog could not shoot,

seeing two sides to everything.

Fish, who never shut their eyes,

can swim on their sides, and see

two worlds: blunt dark below;

above, the daggering light.

Round as a burr, the eye

its whole head, the housefly  
sees in a whizzing circle.

Human double-barreled eyes,  
in their narrow blind trained

forward, hope to shoot and hit  
—if they can find it—

the backward-speeding hole  
in the Cyclops face of the future.

(TTP 77)

Swenson's optimism here rests in her confidence that there will be a passage to the future and that we will get there if we just keep digging what we are doing. What Swenson always bears in mind is that as difficult as it may be to pierce the "backward-speeding hole / in the Cyclops face" (lines 15–16), doing so is what brought us to the present, and it is what we are designed to do. Our "Human double-barreled eyes" are genetic evidence of this; our eyes, the poem tells us, are "trained // forward" and guided by "hope" (11–13).

This is the same hope that registers so forcefully in the words etched into the granite bench above Swenson's grave. On the pedestal of the bench, the architectural support for the seat that itself offers temporary rest—a pause, not a terminus—are words from her poem "I Look at My Hand." These words detail the genetic trace her parents imprinted in her, the foundation for the life she made so different from theirs:

I look at my hand and see  
it is also his and hers;  
the pads of the fingers his,

the wrists and knuckles hers.

(*Nature* 19, lines 1–4)

This is Swenson's history, the part of her that looks backward to find sameness extending through the past to her present, like the view of the worm in "the Nude" that ends "The DNA Molecule." The seat of the bench, supported by the pedestal, bears words that look into the future, searching for the Cyclops eye: "Now my body flat, / the ground breathes.

/ I'll be the grass" (*Nature* 8, lines 1–3). These lines from the poem "The Exchange" face the sky, casting their visage upward and proclaiming the poet's dedication to the crucible of endless selection even from the grave: "I will stand, / a tree here, / never to know another spot. // Wind," she intones, "be motion. / Birds, be passion. / Water, invite me to your bed" (lines 13–18). Swenson summons wind, water, and passion's fire to the earth of her grave, calling the elements to a solitary spot in touch with the world of motion. This is Swenson still deciding, still digging doing it.