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Body My House

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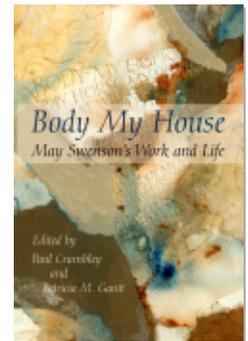
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“QUESTION” AND
MORE QUESTIONS
Two Shells for May Swenson

Mark Doty

The southern barrier island where I'm living this winter is a good place for finding shells. Some days, at the base of the swell of sand where the tide's been busy washing the island away, there are dense patches of them: orangey scallops; oysters in cream, white and charcoal; and my favorite, the black whelks, whorled things that look like they're made of lava. The whelks are seldom whole—they must take a beating on their way to shore—and often they are reduced to the slim spike of the shell's core. Where once there was an elaborate architecture, the shell curving inward into its labyrinthine recesses, now all that's left is the twisting center. At the top remains evidence of the many spiraling rooms; it's like looking into a partly demolished building where the walls were torn away and you can see into the old chambers of apartments. Then the stalk tapers down, twisting to a near dagger-point at the tip. The whole thing resembles some strange Victorian hatpin, or a Viennese art-nouveau tree, or what would have resulted if Rodin had sculpted Loie Fuller dancing in her veils.

I watch myself write that description; I wanted to begin with a sense of spareness, to evoke the lean, abstracted form of the shell, but as soon as I look closely at it—this spiral, unlikely thing resting on my desk right now—my language immediately begins to expand, to reach for metaphoric equivalents. That's my wont, my turn of mind—as if what the pressure of attention produces are sketches, verbal attempts to render aspects of the world, and no one attempt will suffice. It takes a raft of tropes

(demolition, hatpin, tree, dance of the veils) to catch something of the texture of reality. Temperamentally inclined to fullness, I am intrigued by the spare, the pared away, in the way that people who live in cluttered houses look with envy at the sleek modern interiors in design magazines; I admire it, but I doubt I could ever do it.

And therefore I am all the more intrigued by the sheer, elemental quality of Swenson's "Question," which seems itself to have been tumbled down to its core, worn away to a spine of meaning.

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen

Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount
all eager and quick
How will I know
in thicket ahead
is danger or treasure
when Body my good
bright dog is dead

How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye

With cloud for shift
how will I hide?

(*Nature* 45)

That penultimate stanza seems to describe almost exactly what's happened to my shell. Roof and door have been sanded away, wind blows right through the opened eye socket, there is no more protection offered by the house, only this spare, sculptural spine around which a body once resided.

Maybe the first thing to notice in May Swenson's elegant little song

is the swiftness of its opening. “Body my house”—no introductory warm up here, and no punctuation either, just three words telegraphing a metaphor as unornamented as an equation. The image is ancient and somehow comfortable: the flesh as the well-fitting shell of the self, soul’s habitation, mind’s dwelling place. This idea of the self as the body’s occupant is immediately extended and complicated by the next line. If I have a horse and a hound and a house, then I’m a rider and a hunter, presumably, even perhaps a sort of lord of the manor? I have chattel and agency; I have animal assistants to do my bidding and perform the tasks I assign.

But it’s rather odd that the poem isn’t just describing the body, but actively addressing it. Swenson’s poem is so confident that we don’t think at first about the strangeness of this, but in truth when do you ever directly speak to your own body, as if it were an independent being? Renaissance poets used to do so, in dialogues between soul and body, or between profane and sacred aspects of the self. But here only the “I”—the questioning subjectivity, the anxious self—sings to the flesh, in what’s both a love poem and, only three lines in, already a lament. “I” speaks with love and fear because she depends on these agents. If they are, in fact, external, then what and where and how will she be when they’re gone?

What and *where* and *how*: the poem turns on the repetition of these terms of questioning; interestingly, *when* is never a question here, but a given: the horse will fall, the “good bright dog” of the body will, sometime, be dead. What, where, and how begin each new sentence but the final one and give the poem its feeling of driving forwardness, the hurrying motion of running animals. If I isolate them from the rest of the poem, they make for an urgent litany of yearning:

where
how
what
where
how
how
how

How, how, how: the last three questions drum their stunned insistence. *How* can it be that I will die? And how, how, how is it, to be disembodied, to be unhoused in the sky?

One of the things that makes Swenson’s poem feel songlike is the shadow of traditional form ghosting behind it. That opening quatrain

feels very complete and sounds like the beginning of some old ballad. Modern poet that she is, Swenson leaves this foursquare sense of completion behind in the next stanza, and then stanza three feels like two quatrains run together—a feeling that’s heightened because that third stanza offers us such clear, firm rhymes: *go* and *know*, *ahead* and *dead*. Of course we’re meant to hear them, just as we notice that stanza four’s another rhyming quatrain nailed to the page with the insistent rhyme of *sky* and *eye*. But the song can’t be completed, not quite, because the singer has no answer for her question; the poem ends with a formal fragment, just two lines, heightened by reversing the usual order of syntax. You can hear how flat the poem would be if it ended “How will I hide / with cloud for shift?” We need that rhyme in the last place for the poem to feel formally resolved.

But there is more up Swenson’s sleeve. (She is a sly poet, so there nearly always is.) The careful placement of two end words, *shift* and *hide*, calls a great deal of attention to them and invites us to consider them closely.

Shift introduces a new metaphoric term for the body; so far in this poem we’ve not thought of the flesh as clothing, but now we’re asked to think of the speaker as naked, exposed, without her costume of skin. To lose one’s clothes, of course, is not nearly as much a catastrophe as to lose one’s house or horse or dog—nakedness is a far more familiar condition than homelessness or powerlessness. She’s shown real affection for the body “all eager and quick” and “good bright dog”—but there isn’t a sense that these elements *are* the self; they are its brave lieutenants. And we can’t really read this simple and beautiful line—“with cloud for shift”—without thinking about the other meaning of *shift*, since the poem is indeed a contemplation of change, of the prospect of shifting states of being, from embodied to disembodied, clothed to nude. To be a naked element of sky, a participant in atmosphere, unmediated by external agents—is that such a bad thing? Without your clothes, you can’t hide, but perhaps it is a pleasure, a boon, to be unhidden.

Swenson doesn’t know the answer, of course; that’s why the poem bears this title. And she engineers a very subtle, formal indication that ambivalence lies at the poem’s core. The poem is primarily composed of four-syllable lines, which account for its quick, hoofbeat quality. There are five-syllable lines scattered throughout, but there is only one six-syllable one. A poem’s longest line is often a kind of flag the poet has placed, a sign that *here* is the crux of the matter. And the longest line in “Question” is: “is danger or treasure.”

Of course it refers, specifically, to the body's ability to locate trouble or reward, but I'd suggest it also points to the deep question fueling the poem. If the self is something housed in the body, clothed by it, what will it mean for us to be free of such disguise and restraint?

All the work of pointing toward meaning that is usually performed by commas and periods and their kin is here enacted by line-making, by syntax, and by an occasional capital letter to show us where a new unit of thought begins. There is one mark of punctuation in the whole poem, in the very final position. One thing this accomplishes is to send us back to the poem's title—back to the beginning, to reread, to try to understand where, and how, this strange little song has taken us.

But it also suggests, subtly, that there is just one question here; the poem, after all, isn't called "Questions." There is one consideration at its core: what is the self, where is it? Is it a good thing for that self to be hidden in the body? And that day when it will no longer be sequestered, but will be naked to the winds: should we look to that as a wonderful end or a terrifying exposure? Freed of the flesh, are we liberated or merely exposed?

Yesterday the sun was diffused through a thin fog, a vapor so suffusing the atmosphere that I can't find a noun for it. Not a glaze or a haze or a scrim, but a kind of dispersion that seemed, finally, like a thickening of the light. It was so bright I had to shield my eyes from the sea, while I walked for a warm hour between storms. The tide had kicked up new shells. Among them, a second core of a whelk, but entirely different. The one I described above was reduced to something as severe and lean as bone—but this new shell was all voluptuous curve, all cream and marble texture; the body it evokes is female, voluptuary, classical drapery over real hips and generous curves. And thus it is a shell for Swenson too.

Here she is, after all, in "On Handling Some Small Shells from the Windward Islands," celebrating the interiority of the shell, its perpetual coiling inward toward the unseeable.

The curve and continuous
spiral intrinsic, their

role eternal inversion,
the closed, undulant scroll.

(*Nature*, 199)

What is sung here, of course, is the female body, the beautiful sense of curving inward toward a mystery, a hidden chamber. Later in the same poem the speaker's pleasure in the shells' evocation of female sexuality is made overt. The gathered shells are

Peculiar fossil-
fruits that suck through ribbed

lips and gaping sutures
into secret clefts

the sweet wet with a tame taste.
Vulviform creatures, or

rather, their rocklike
backs with labial bellies.

(20)

That is a precise description of some particular marine creatures, but it is also undeniably sexy: *lips* and *gaping*, *secret clefts*, *sweet wet*—Swenson's clearly enjoying the eros of her game.

There is a decidedly playful quality to her evocations of the erotic body, a pleasure in speaking quite clearly while not seeming to do so at all; one can imagine the speaker of the poem above protesting with a smile that's she's only talking about shells, after all. This is the poet who, in a poem called "Her Early Work," complained about the poems she used to write by saying that "one could never tell who was addressed, or ever undressed"! The mature Swenson wants to be quite clear about the identity of the beloved, or at least the beloved's gender. Is it because she's still a woman of her generation (born in Utah, after all, in the early part of the twentieth century), or because she is simply too much a lover of metaphor, the allusive possibilities of the veil, that she prefers suggestive indirection to straightforwardness?

Here, for instance, is

LITTLE LION FACE

Little lion face
I stooped to pick
among the mass of thick
succulent blooms, the twice

streaked flanges of your silk
sunwheel relaxed in wide

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dilation, I brought inside,
placed in a vase. Milk

of your shaggy stem
sticky on my fingers, and
your barbs hooked to my hand,
sudden stings from them

were sweet. Now I'm bold
to touch your swollen neck,
put careful lips to slick
petals, snuff up gold

pollen in your navel cup.
Still fresh before night
I leave you, dawn's appetite
to renew our glide and suck.

An hour ahead of sun
I come to find you. You're
twisted shut as a burr,
neck drooped unconscious,

an inert, limp bundle,
a furled cocoon, your
sun-streaked aureole
eclipsed and dun.

Strange feral flower asleep
with flame-ruff wilted,
all magic halted,
a drink I pour, steep

in the glass for your
undulant stem to suck.
Oh, lift your young neck,
open and expand to your

lover, hot light.
Gold corona, widen to sky.
I hold you lion in my eye
sunup until night.

(Complete Love Poems 56–57)

Could there be a sexier flower in all of American poetry? For the first four stanzas, Swenson's game is to establish the poem's literal level—the picking of a dandelion—and to describe the act and flower with obvious sensual pleasure, a quality rendered in part by the rhymes' sensuous music (*pick/thick, silk/milk, wide/inside, neck/slick*) and in part by the sheer gorgeousness of phrasing; “the twice / streaked flanges of your silk / sun-wheel relaxed in wide / dilation.” To mouth just those twelve words, lips and tongue must move through three long *es*, three long *is*, one long *a*, as well as a series of *ts*, *ks*, and *ds* that seem to explode at the roof of the mouth and behind the teeth. The passage involves us physically in the sort of tongue and lip work the poem proposes. Consonance, assonance, sibilance: Swenson's indulgently pulled out the stops.

The sexual resonance of “relaxed in wide / dilation” can't be missed, and it seems to be Swenson's cue for the fifth stanza's admission of the nature of this metaphoric play. The gold pollen's resting in “your navel cup”; the body of the flower is double for another body. What's been implicit so far is suddenly explicit, underlined by “our glide and suck”—a pair of verbs difficult, even with some stretch of the imagination, to apply to the appreciation of flora.

Swenson could easily have underplayed the poem, focusing on vehicle rather than tenor, keeping the erotic implications as subtext. But “Little Lion Face” wants to break loose from the conceit that has generated it. Part of the piece's energy derives from the poet's pleasure in her own transparency. She not only allows us to see through her game but makes the game's *outrageousness* a good part of the point. Swenson is not only hiding in plain sight but *flaunting*, as they used to say, a celebration of sexual pleasure. Her conceit delights in dressing up her lover as a flower, only to delight further in stripping the costume away.

And yet this playful undressing is a way to pour enormous intensity into the emblem: “Oh, lift your young neck / open and expand to your / lover, hot light.”

How much work that comma after “Oh” accomplishes! Rather than apostrophe, the word becomes an exclamation, a sexual sigh, the vowel-cry of desire, the *oh* of the overcome. Oh, *young, open, your, lover*: the vowels say *O, uh, O, oo, O*, and the stanza break that interrupts their progression provides a moment of delicious hesitation. The poem's final verbs are *lift, open, expand, widen, hold*: Inside her metaphoric disguise—even though it is *barely* a disguise—Swenson is able to pour heat on the page, to be vulnerable, possessing, possessed.

“Little Lion Face” is a breathtaking performance on this bracing line

between directness and disguise. It's a poem about a dandelion, about a lion, about a lover, and these three elements remain in suspension, as it were. Swenson isn't interested in allowing the tenor to triumph over the vehicle, exactly; the dandelion does not exist here simply to illustrate the lovers' relationship, which is barely sketched, really—known to us *through* the veil of the comparison. Instead this is a kind of dynamic play that allows the relationship between vehicle and tenor to *remain* dynamic, in flux.

May Swenson must have been, of course, a shell collector, both because she lived by the sea, on Long Island, and because she was such a student of natural form, attendant to the structures the world presents and their possibilities for the poet. These two coiled metaphors on my desk—body as spare revenant, as conundrum, hollowed out thing, and body as coiled voluptuary, sensuous container—I am keeping these shells for her.

And holding them beside these two poems—my own dynamic interplay of vehicle and tenor!—I see that I oversimplify in keeping them separate. Reading “Little Lion Face” causes me to reconsider the role of eros in “Question,” with its rhetoric of master/mistress and servant, the beast-energy of the body. Do we know for certain that the body being addressed is the speaker's body, after all? What if she were speaking to someone else? I don't think that's the poem's primary sense, but it doesn't exclude that reading either; “Little Lion Face” teaches us to keep things open, not draw those lines of metaphoric equivalence too tightly.

And by the same token, “Little Lion Face,” read through “Question,” deepens and darkens too—isn't mortality and evanescence just around the corner in any love poem? There's a sort of diminishment at the poem's center, a near-death, when the little flower is

an inert, limp bundle,
a furled cocoon, your
sun-streaked aureole
eclipsed and dun.

Now the “flame-ruff” is wilted, and “all magic halted.” It's a moment anticipatory of that kernel of loss around which desire and affection are built; it points to the fate of the body that “Question” so nakedly considers, but here gives that fate the sweet clothing of desired flesh.

Swenson is an inclusive recorder, an attendant to reality—less the purist and perfectionist, more interested in the seismographic recording of the nuances of perception and feeling, the daily, observant, penetrating

eye. Thus she studies the nuances of physicality with a remarkable boldness and range. There is a phenomenology of embodiment to be written about her work. She is as likely to celebrate the flesh as she is to seem troubled or even revolted by it; what other woman of her generation—what other *poet* of her generation—was so attentive to the inscription of the body?