To confirm a Thing and give thanks
to the stars that named me
and fixed me in the Wheel of heaven
my fate pricked out in the Boxer's chest
in the hips curled over the Horse
Though girled in an apple-pink month
and the moon hornless
the Brothers glitter in my wristbones
At ankle and knee I am set astride
and made stubborn in love

(from "To Confirm a Thing")

How could it have been that I didn't find the feathery May Swenson until my thirties? No small part of the fault, of course, was mine: though she died when I was a child, Swenson cast a visible figure in her own lifetime, publishing healthily and winning recognition through a happy abacus of notable prizes and awards—a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Bollingen Prize, and a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship are only a few—before spending her last nine years as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Moreover, in the decades since her death, her work has maintained a varied if modest presence in almost all of the standard textbook anthologies, leaving little room but for me to concede that I should very well have come upon her oeuvre on my own quite long ago.

Now far beyond the fault, I know the loss was mine as well. Almost as soon as I was "stroked / by [the] magician's fur" that lines so many of her poems,

There was a lodestone
made the stars rush down
like pins that fastened us together
under the same dark cloak

(from "A History of Love")

And yet, in the accumulated days since that spellbinding first encounter—when, thanks be to the gods, a modern anthology truly served its righteous purpose—I can't quite keep myself from a persistent wondering: How could it be that, in all of my years on earth and in love with the life of poetry, over a whole spent quarter-century of classrooms and conversations and libraries, the ink of her name had only barely—and altogether accidentally—met my eye?

For better and worse, Swenson is, as Ashbery once said of Elizabeth Bishop, "a poet's poet's poet." When, in his introduction to *The Best of the Best American Poetry 1988-97,* the skeptical arch-critic Harold Bloom—ranking Swenson as a "major poet" equal in power to none other than Bishop, James Merrill, and Amy Clampitt—characterized her as "undervalued," he wasn't joking; at its best, Swenson's work contains a blend of mind, music, and imagination so rich and so original that hers should easily eclipse the reputations of a full-capacity handful of her more celebrated contemporaries. How is it that the poet of the following lines could possibly remain unknown to any one of us, let alone a card-carrying member of the very Academy to which Swenson gave her closing years?

One must be a cloud to occupy a house of cloud.
I twirled in my dream, and was deformed,
and reformed, making many faces,

refusing the fixture of a solid soul.
So came to a couch I could believe,
although it altered

its facile carvings, at each heave
became another throne.
Neither dissolved nor solid, I was settled

and unsettled in my placeless chair.
A voluntary mobile, manybodied, I traded
shape for the versatility of air.

(from "Seated in a Plane")

The factors contributing to Swenson's relative though startlingly undeserved obscurity are many, and she herself would seem to bear at least a small share of the blame. As the late, also "undervalued" W.D. Snodgrass once remarked to me, few if any poets can successfully identify their own best poems, and Swenson was no exception to the rule. Though she was not, in fairness, entirely deaf to her own charisma, Snodgrass's principle is too directly demonstrated by her *New and Selected Things Taking Place* (1978), the second and last career-spanning selection she would oversee, and the one representative volume with which the general reading public was left for the thirteen years following its publication. But to describe *New and Selected Things Taking Place* as "representative" is more than somewhat disingenuous; the volume is significantly weighted toward what were then new poems, to which are given a full eighty pages, while Swenson's five prior collections are reduced to roughly forty pages apiece, saving no space whatsoever for her already considerable stack of otherwise uncollected poems (she died with half of her astounding output left unpublished). Swenson did issue one final collection, *In Other Words,* in 1987, but when later selections were at last compiled—*The Love Poems of May Swenson* in 1991 (re-released, with an introduction by Maxine Kumin, as *The Complete Love Poems of May Swenson* in 2003), *Nature: Poems Old and New* in 1994 (re-released in 2000), and *May Out West* in 1996—they were too narrowly focused to display Swenson's total range. That a handsome comprehensive edition of Swenson's collected poems was released at last in 2013 (her centennial) by the Library of America is itself a persuasive testament to her abiding power as a poet; that no one took much notice is a sad indication of just how inadequately her work had been represented in the more than thirty years before.

One result of the absence of a truly serviceable selected is that Swenson is probably best known today for her two most eccentric projects, her "riddles for the very young" (which she published as *Poems to Solve* and *More Poems to Solve,* in 1966 and 1971 respectively, consolidated into a complete edition in 1993) and her concrete "shape" poems, published as *Iconographs* (1970). This legacy is pointedly unfortunate, as the latter poems especially—though they contain their own small number of successes—are marred by a quasi-technological typographical experimentation comparable in broad terms to the keystrokes characteristic of so much of Cummings, whose works in that vein share with Swenson's two inversely related effects: an undeniably dwindling intrigue (if not to say potency) and a swelling of that sense of softly-embarrassing quaintness marked by fashions that are more than just a shade past out-of-date.

And yet the *Iconographs* are also perhaps the most overt manifestation of the imaginative formal dexterity that underpins so many of Swenson's greatest poems. At her strongest, in fact, Swenson displays a sensibility verging on the Metaphysical. This is certainly the case with what is probably her single best-known poem, the early "Question"—by no means the only highlight from *Another Animal* (1954), her debut, which she published, as did Stevens, with *Harmonium,* only after she was 40—a text that has been earmarked by editors ranging from Richard Ellmann to Mark Strand, J.D. McClatchy, David Lehman, Robert Hass, and Robert Pinsky for inclusion in an array of large and small anthologies (thus rendering an excerpt here unnecessary). But the very title of that poem points to an even deeper kinship with the most probing of Early Modern poets: her poems often begin from, contain, and/or take the shape of queries, and as a result they *think* their way from first line to last. Her poems occupy the interrogative form as other texts inhabit the structure of the sonnet, revealing while adapting its dynamic integrity:

Each like a leaf
like a wave
to be replaced
repeated

What do we crave
heated by cerebral
fire?

(from "Each Like a Leaf")

Am I the bullet
or the target,
or the hand
that holds the gun?

(from "Cause & Effect")

"Questions" are indeed, as Grace Schulman observed, "the wellsprings of May Swenson's art," and questions—questing—permeate the poems both in substance and in form. It's precisely in the deftness with which she matches active substance to unfurling form that she most fully displays her latter-day Metaphysical sensibility; her poems constantly and nimbly embody the "sensuous apprehension of thought" that Eliot underlined as a hallmark of the Metaphysical poetics, yielding a "recreation of thought into feeling" that in Swenson stems directly from the effortless-seeming union of poetic shape with perceptive, intellectual sensation. This is so even in her earliest pages, as in the already assured "Three Jet Planes," where aircrafts "skip above the roofs / through a tri-square of blue / tattooed by TV crossbars / that lean in cryptic concert in their wake // Like skaters on a lake," later

leaving behind
where they first burst into blue
the invisible boiling wind of sound

As horsemen used to do
As horsemen used to gallop through
a hamlet on hunting morn
and heads and arms were thrust
through windows
leaving behind them the torn
shriek of the hound
and their wrestling dust

At times, she can read like a daughter born of Dickinson and Donne:

The earth our bulb from which we spring
our green body a vaster thing
an unknown island to be sought
volute discovery
the oceanic span of thought
the soul's geography

(from "An Unknown Island")

But we might even here discern a further basis for Swenson's general neglect: we live in an age far less enamored of poetry buoyed by what could perhaps be described as "formal imagination" than was almost any prior age—and that is to our detriment—while the few who most vociferously endorse formal practice and procedure are often content to fill their containers with matter of but limited vitality. Swenson, though she is at all turns a formally-minded poet—and often a pure formalist—is decidedly not a New Formalist; she is a free verse poet in the formal mode, much as were many of the young Modernists. Indeed, Swenson is a master of what Coleridge delineates as "organic form" (as opposed to the "mechanical"), which "is innate [to a particular text, and] shapes as it develops itself from within, [so that] the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward Form." It's this very sense of inevitability rooted in the tangible discovery of innate formal body that enlivens so many of Swenson's poems and makes them downright gratifying—as with, say, George Herbert—and constitutes the major portion of her gift. Unfortunately, this same trait seems to have rendered her work at once too formal to be fashionable and too unusual to be embraced by any number of contemporary poets committed to the exercise of form.

Not all of her limited popularity, however, can be attributed to the joint forces of imperfect presentation and ingenuity of form. As is the case with many a born love poet—and Swenson indisputably was one—her effulgent sensuality is sometimes overcome by an ingenuousness that bends toward sentimentality. Thus when Swenson falters, it is because the grains of her otherwise bracing sincerity have furrowed with too little resistance into a pat and saccharine mold. But who among even our most transcendent poets is fully invulnerable to the charge of unevenness? And is even always better than the odd? More often for Swenson, love gives birth to contoured loveliness; "Love Is," she says, "a rain of diamonds / in the mind." Yet I suspect that Swenson's ease with sentiment serves for many contemporary readers not as a ready on-ramp, but instead as one more stumbling block; her earnestness is the very antithesis of today's dominant ironies, whether they be of the stark, moonstone kind we find in Strand, for example, or of the more common slapstick laugh-line variety that defines the new ennui. Nevertheless, Swenson is not without her darkness, nor real playfulness. In poems that archly foreshadow the gait and tone of successors like Kay Ryan, Swenson stitches the tender to the wry:

My left upper
lip and half

my nose is gone.
I drink my coffee

on the right from
a warped cup

whose left lip dips.
My cigarette's

thick as a finger.
Somebody else's.

I put lip-
stick on a cloth-

stuffed doll's
face that's
surprised when one
side smiles.

("After the Dentist")

Readers who have the heart for Swenson will also have, as a reward, the glad discovery of her engulfing Eros. Wonderfully—and like Whitman's—Swenson's erotic sense extends into all realms of earthly materiality, infusing the innocent no less than the quotidian. The thrum of fleshly sensuality is so present in Swenson's sensibility that many of her most palpably erotic poems—"Centaur," for instance, or "Riding the 'A'"—are rooted not in sexual appetite or union (though, certainly, there are those), but in matter we typically judge to be at once utterly sexless and quite far off from the romantic, such as public transportation and childhood play.

What ties even Swenson's most throbbingly embodied songs to those of a more cerebral texture is the same sharpened faculty that leads to her frequent association with Bishop (whom she met at Yaddo, with whom she then actively corresponded and also addressed in several poems) and Marianne Moore: seeing. If not quite a documentary impulse, Swenson shares with each of the aforementioned poets—with whom, despite differences, she herself identified—a dedicated interest in meticulous, enlivening depiction. From the beginning, Swenson itches to "get it right," debating whether "Naked palomino / is smooth peeled willow / or marble under water or clean morning snow" ("Horses in Central Park"), for example, and making of the moon an "old fossil / to be scrubbed / and studied / like a turtle's stomach" ("After the Flight of Ranger VII"). One of my favorite poems of Swenson's seeing is "The Cloud-Mobile," a sly ars poetica riveted to the particulars of skygazing, an engagement defined in equal parts by literal and figurative vision:

Above my face is a map.
Continents form and fade.
Blue countries, made
on a white sea, are erased

and white countries traced
on a blue sea.

It is a map that moves:
faster than real,
but so slow.
Only my watching proves
that island has being,
or that bay.

In her elegy for Bishop, "In the Bodies of Words," Swenson pointedly—and poignantly—underscores the joint powers of seeing things and seeing into them:

Fog-gray rags of foam swell in scallops up the beach,
their outlines traced by a troupe of pipers—
your pipers, Elizabeth!—their racing legs like spokes
of tiny wire wheels.

Faintly the flying string can still be seen.
It swerves, lowers, touching the farthest tips of waves.
Now it veers, appears to shorten, points straight out.
It slips behind the horizon. Vanished.

But vision lives, Elizabeth. Your vision multiplies,
is magnified in the bodies of words.
Not vanished, your vision lives from eye to eye,
your words from lip to lip perpetuated.

Leaving aside a few stray essays and one sound yet slender festschrift, Swenson has largely gone un-elegized. But her words in all their body—supple, searching, visionary—are surely all the monument she needs.

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The Honest Pint
Number 33
ISSN: 2330-5088
September 2015

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