



"May Swenson and Delilah," oil by Bernard Rosenquit

# A Tribute to May Swenson

*Veneta Nielsen*

AS ONE OF MANY WHO HAVE BORROWED deeply from May Swenson's art, in classrooms over the nation and abroad, I offer tribute to her respect for the wonder, the splendor, of every living thing she encountered, human or other-human. I pay tribute to her uniquely brilliant perceptions and her need to record and authorize those perceptions, that respect. Hers were always true and exact words, used with fine artistry. I thank her for what she gives and is—artist, teacher, wise friend.

Many years ago, when she came to visit her family, then still living at the base of University Hill in Logan, she and I went together to Logan Canyon to picnic on the bank of the river. We found a place above where the water divides to offer its nourishment to the town's gardens, lawns, trees, and fields and to give Logan's houses light, warmth, and function. May touched the water barefoot; it was chilly, electrifying, swift. She talked about the river's giving, and about the obligation of the poet as artist. She talked seriously and thoughtfully about her work.

"I think I have mastered my craft; now I want to use it to say some things," she said. Since then she has said many things. Besides her delightful, wonderfully graphic poems, many reveal her dedication to some vision still to be realized, still to be embodied in words. A few

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lines from "In the Bodies of Words," her poem on the death of Elizabeth Bishop exemplify:

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.

At the time of our conversation, her poem "The Centaur" had just been published. She had, by a magical, mythical image, described herself riding a stick horse by the old canal bank near the family home, the early stirrings of her art's life. As the child rider of two worlds, the spirit and matter worlds symbolized by the centaur, she drew Mind as controller of the horse compounded of body power, sense experience, and spirit. The image depicts both human and beyond-human things, in a matter world. At the poem's ending her mother asks, "Where have you been?" Her answer was not merely, "Along the canal bank."

*What's that in your pocket?* she said  
*Just my knife.* It weighted 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.

May seemed to know her destiny as artist-poet from the beginning of her work, and from the green and growing wonder of her spirit she has given as the river gives its gifts, fully, naturally. Her poems have taught thousands of students in our schools new ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, understanding. Tirelessly inquisitive herself, she invites students to look more closely into the meanings of both physical and spiritual realities. Possibly more than any other contemporary poet, she has shown the unity and identity of nature's creations.

She has shown the sacredness of a life based on reverence and dedication, has helped us to better live our humanity, to sharpen our senses and deepen ways of being. An honorary doctorate conferred by Utah State University last year is only one of many signals that she belongs also to the order of benefactors to liberal education. Many other prestigious honors have showered her with grateful recognition, with scholarships, travel opportunities, unusual financial awards.

One of the truly great, Goethe, is said to have been asked a question about religion and answered that true religion is respect for what is above us, what is below us, and what is equal to us. May Swenson, Logan's poet as well as the world's, has respected her life and brought

respect and honor to us all, adding her mind's wisdom and vision to the soul of the world. Other teachers, writers, readers may tell of her phenomenal gifts. To know her, however, one must read her poems, so many, serious, witty, light and dark, but all distinguished by the rare flashing intelligence and love. At the end of her most recent book, titled *In Other Words*, she pronounces simply, like the cockatoo Blondi in the epic poem "Banyan":

The purpose of life is  
To find the purpose of life  
To find the purpose  
Of life is  
The Purpose  
Life is  
To find.