

Accidental Mystic

Paul Swenson

Once I picnicked with an atheist
(only one in Davis County?),
spread our gourmet bounty
on a blanket where we lay,
a grassy bank beside a stream. Trick
was to appear to be agnostic,
to encourage her to dream
out loud—express her awe
for innocence of animals,
auditory mystery of bees.
And all the while—all the while—
a beam of sunlight through the trees
revealed the gorgeous dialectic
of a skeptic's smile. Reflecting now
on ecstasy (vouchsafed for angels,
saints, and the elect?) vexed to recollect
her leaving unreturned the novel
I had lent her. Complexity and doubt—

pleased or burned it sent her to the arms
of Cowboy Jesus? Too easy to forget
the link between the way I learned
to think, and drinking in
the paradox—attracted to a few
who call themselves free-thinkers.
Nat Hentoff flat refused to off
a fellow creature—wouldn't wink
at killing, if in war, the womb,
the execution room. Take care
to still adore the late Tom Lehrer—
“make a cross on on your abdomen,
when in Rome do as a Roman,”
Thomas sang. But it was
a she, accidental mystic,
characteristic of her kind,
who led me to lie down
and stare unblinking into heaven.