

May Swenson: The Rise of the Reluctant Feminist

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Introductory Questions

- How does May Swenson's disregard for labels contribute to her poetry?
- How does May Swenson's poetry help us grow as individuals?

Labels, Defined



- Woman
- Feminist
- Lesbian Poet





MAY SWENSON

published by Rinehart & Company
Photo by Henry Carlisle - 1958

"If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, together women ought to be able to turn it right side up again."

-- Sojourner Truth

a timeline of american feminism

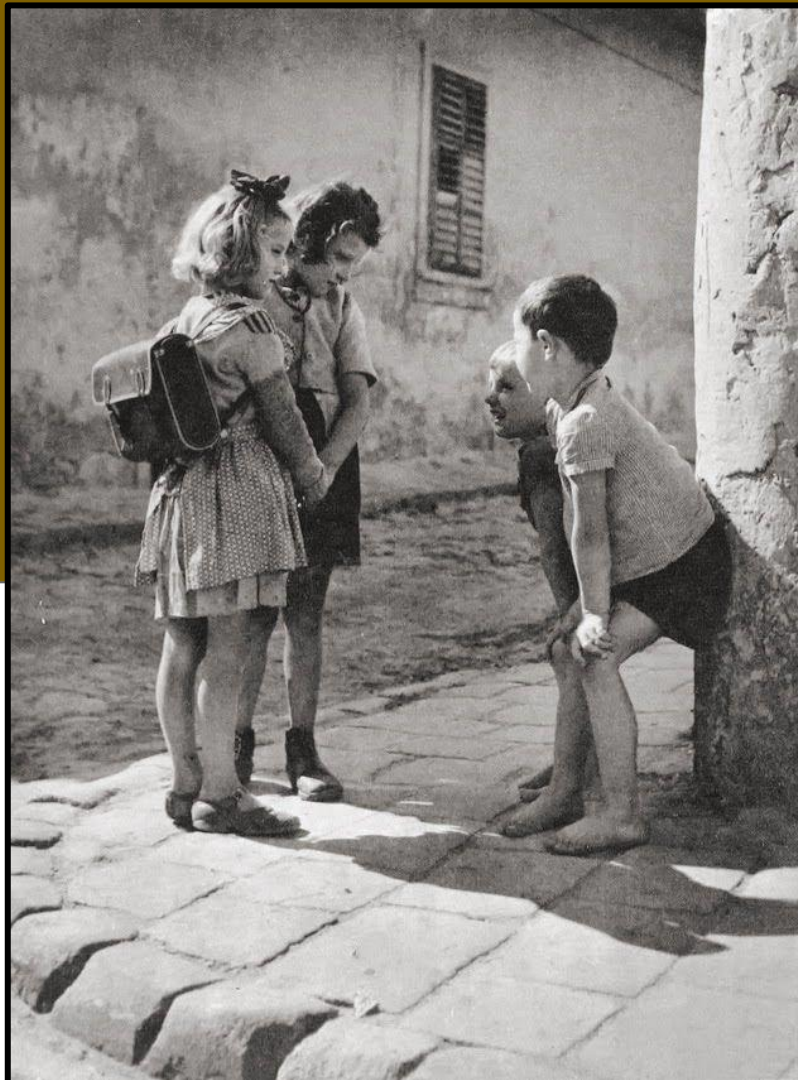


source: <http://eserver.org/feminism/discourse/Womens-Movement.html>



Girls

- Hair pulled back
- Dresses
- Shoes
- Accessories
- Body language



Boys

- Short Hair
- Shorts
- Dirty feet
- Body language

The Centaur 1955

The summer that I was ten-
Can it be there was only one
summer that I was ten? It must

have been a long one then-
each day I'd go out to choose
a fresh horse from my stable

which was a willow grove
down by the old canal.
I'd go on my two bare feet.

**But when, with my brother's jack-knife,
I had cut me a long limber horse
with a good thick knob for a head,**

**and peeled him sleek and clean
except a few leaves for the tail,
and cinched my brother's belt**

around his head for a rein,
I'd straddle and canter him fast
up the grass bank to the path,

trot along in the lovely dust
that talcumed over his hoofs,
hiding my toes, and turning

his feet to swift half-moons.
The willow knob with the strap
jouncing between my thighs

was the pommel and yet the poll
of my nickering pony's head.
My head and my neck were mine,

yet they were shaped like a horse.
My hair flopped to the side
like the mane of a horse in the wind.

My forelock swung in my eyes,
my neck arched and I snorted.
I shied and skittered and reared,

stopped and raised my knees,
pawed at the ground and quivered.
My teeth bared as we wheeled

and swished through the dust again.

I was the horse and the rider,
and the leather I slapped to his rump

spanked my own behind.
Doubled, my two hoofs beat
A gallop along the bank,

the wind twanged in my mane,
my mouth squared to the bit.
And yet I sat on my steed

quiet, negligent riding,
my toes standing in the stirrups,
my thighs hugging his ribs.

At a walk we drew up to the porch.
I tethered him to a paling.
Dismounting, I smoothed my skirt

and entered the dusky hall.
My feet on the clean linoleum
left ghostly toes in the hall.

*Where have you been? said my mother.
Been riding, I said from the sink,
and filled me a glass of water.*

*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.*



- “my brother’s jack-knife”
- “my brother’s belt”



“Just my knife.”

“I was the horse and the rider”

That One 1963

I hate male and female.

I defy that split,
nor will I admit
that ram is grail.

I sacred that one who
heads beyond the fix
of fox or feather-breast, who'll mix
their scents and undo

the old, stamped trails. I crown
that one, gliding ambiguous
into a shape contiguous,
but unobliged to clout or open gown.

Grin, champions, in your dual
postures and costumes. We, who lift
our fluffs and leathers off, shift
scales for a whole skin's renewal.



“gliding ambiguous



into a shape contiguous”

**“If the word means
‘I am Feminine and
that’s all I need,’ I
disagree—that’s
extreme. It all
depends on
definition.”**



**“I don’t actually like the word
very much if it means to cut out
the male.”**

**“Male and female exist in every
person.”**

“I was the horse and the rider”

Conclusion

“I’ve always felt complete within myself as a person but sometimes felt that some of the rest of the world didn’t find me as complete or capable as if I had been born male. This has annoyed me.”



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