



Queer Spirituality:
Exploring the Poetry of
May Swenson

Presenter: Sabrina Madsen
Mentor: Paul Crumbley

Swenson

Question:

How does Swenson use nature-based settings and queer language to portray her spiritual beliefs and renounce Mormon doctrine?

The Centaur



The Centaur

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 slick 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 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.



each day I'd go out to choose
a fresh horse from my stable

which was a willow grove
down by the old canal.

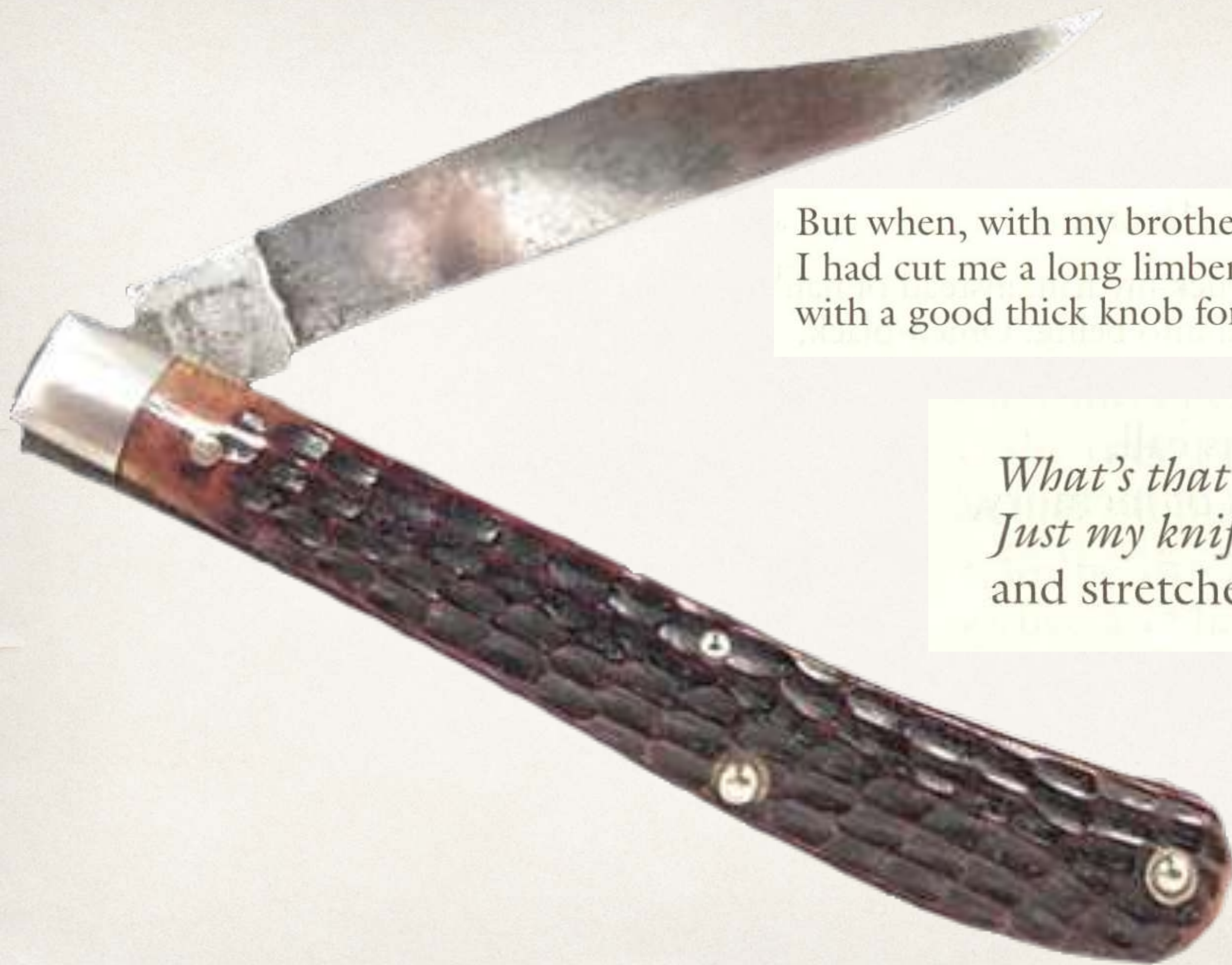
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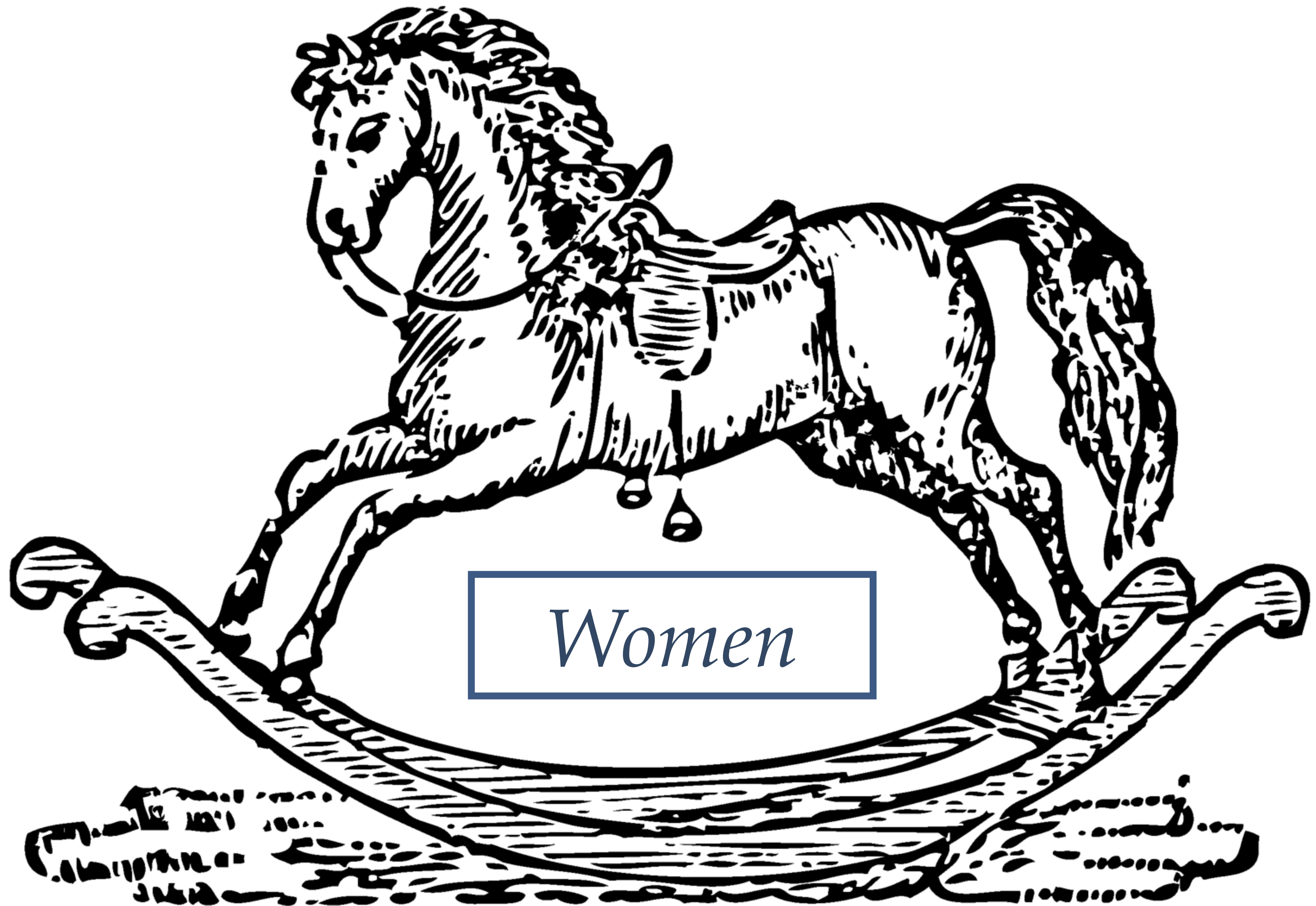
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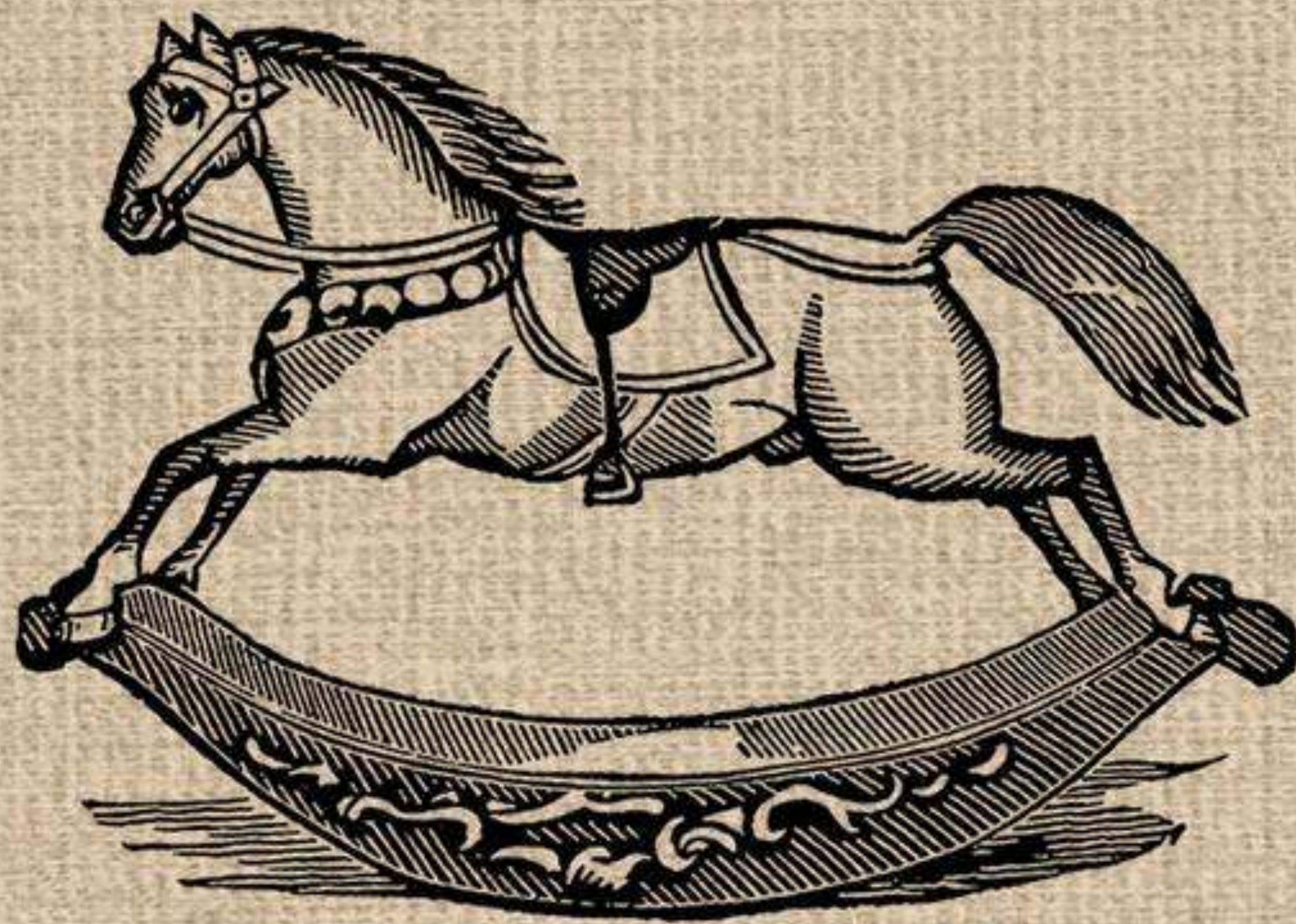
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Women

Women
should be
pedestals
moving
pedestals
moving
to the
motions
of men
Or they
should be
little horses
those wooden
sweet
oldfashioned
painted
rocking
horses
the gladdest things in the toyroom
The
pegs
of their
ears
so familiar
and dear
to the trusting
fists
To be chafed
feelingly
and then
unfeelingly
To be
joyfully
ridden
rockingly
ridden until
the restored
egos dismount and the legs stride away
Immobile
sweetlipped
sturdy
and smiling
women
willing
to be set
into motion
Women
should be
pedestals
should always
be waiting
to men





14 Continue in the spirit of meekness, and beware of ^apride. Let thy soul delight in thy ^bhusband, and the ^cglory which shall come upon him.

Immobile willing
sweetlipped to be set
sturdy into motion
and smiling Women
women should be
should always pedestals
be waiting to men



Let Us Prepare

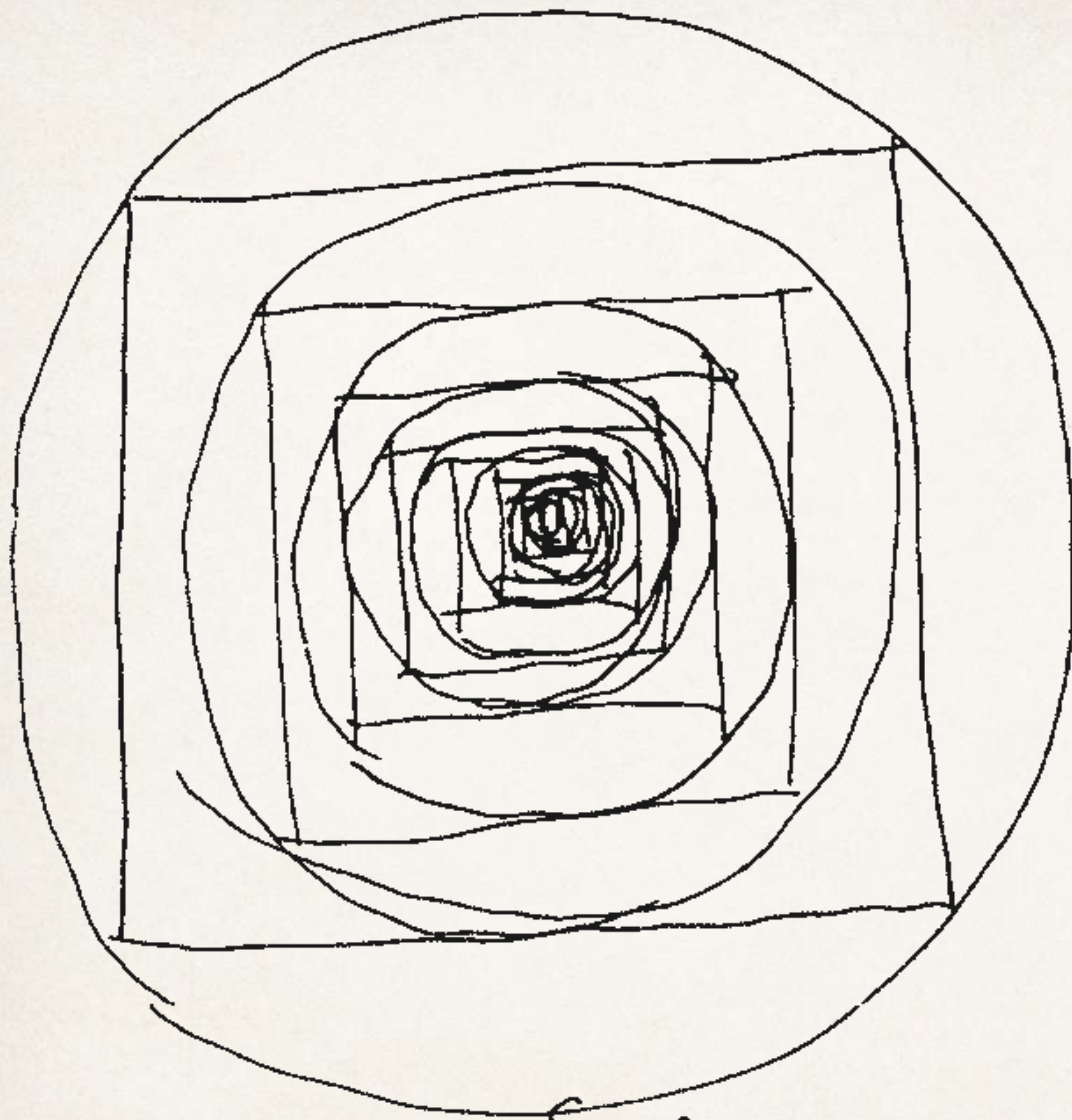
Let Us Prepare

to get beyond the organic
for surely there is something else
to which it is an impediment an opaque pod
What if it is sight that blinds
hearing that deafens
touch that makes us numb?
What if trussed in a jacket of blood
to a rack of bone we smother
in the dungeon of our lungs?
Today we are in our brain

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TO MIX WITH TIME

a laboratory
Must we be here
tomorrow?
Are there not
pinnacles
on which to stand
cleanly
without a head?
Between the belly
of the sun and the belly
of the world
must we bounce forever
magnetized generations of the circle?
Let us eat nothing but darkness
refuse our stale orbit
and walk only in sleep
There to descry a crack in the future
and work to widen it
Let us prepare to bare ourselves outside the gibbet-hood
of the world
without excuse of flesh or apology of blood



may Swenson

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of the sun and the belly
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Mornings Innocent



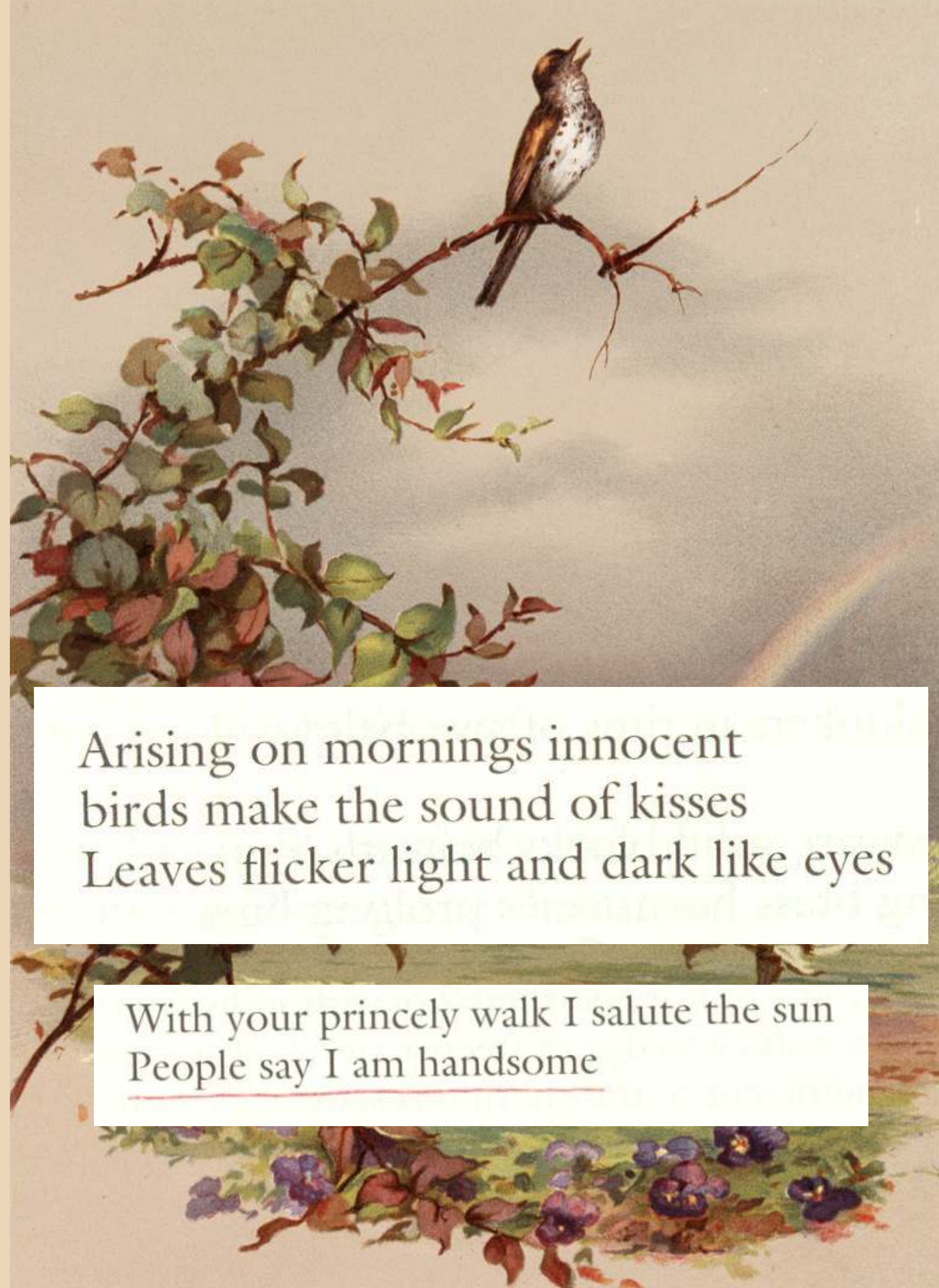
Mornings Innocent

I wear your smile upon my lips
arising on mornings innocent
Your laughter overflows my throat
Your skin is a fleece about me
With your princely walk I salute the sun
People say I am handsome

Arising on mornings innocent
birds make the sound of kisses
Leaves flicker light and dark like eyes

I melt beneath the magnet of your gaze
Your husky breath insinuates my ear
Alert and fresh as grass I wake

and rise on mornings innocent
The strands of the wrestler
run golden through my limbs
I cleave the air with insolent ease
With your princely walk I salute the sun
People say I am handsome



Arising on mornings innocent
birds make the sound of kisses
Leaves flicker light and dark like eyes

With your princely walk I salute the sun
People say I am handsome

Conclusion:

Throughout these four poems, Swenson demonstrates her belief in true spiritual growth and peace being found through liberated self-expression outside gender, societal, and religious expectations. Through the use of a gender-bending speaker in “The Centaur,” gender-conforming characters in “Women,” challenging questions in “Let Us Prepare,” and finally a speaker who finds natural peace in “Mornings Innocent,” Swenson successfully establishes her path to spiritual attainment.

Sources / Additional Reading

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