

# Poetry contest honoring May Swenson anticipates groundbreaking for retreat

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Star Coulbrooke, director of the USU Writing Center and poet laureate for Logan City, is overseeing a poetry contest to mark the upcoming groundbreaking for the Swenson House, a writers' gathering space to be built on the site of the original Swenson family home at the base of Old Main.

Scroll down to end of article for suggested prompt lines from Swenson poems

***"I rode on his shoulder. He showed me the moon."***

When she wrote that line in the poem "The Seed of my Father," May Swenson was distant from her father and Logan childhood home — in both years and miles.

Now the Department of English and other admirers of Swenson's poetry are hoping to re-plant that seed in a poetry contest for student writers inspired by the many insightful and exquisite lines of May Swenson poetry.

Deadline for entries to the Swenson Legacy Poetry Contest is Sept. 7. Winning authors will read their poems at the Sept. 18 groundbreaking for the newly imagined Swenson House. To be built at 669 E. 500 North in Logan, the site of the former Swenson family home, the Swenson House will be a retreat and gathering place for literary artists of all stripes, says Joseph Ward, dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

May Swenson is widely considered to be among the most influential American poets of the 20th century. And, a 1934 graduate of Utah State University, she's perhaps its most

famous alumnus. Since her death in 1989, faculty in the Department of English have continued efforts to keep her legacy alive.

The contest, said poet Star Coulbrooke, director of the USU Writing Center, is designed to do just that.

Coulbrooke and her writing students have created a list of poetry-writing "prompts" made up of lines from Swenson poems. The list can be found here.

A poem entered in the contest "can be inspired by a Swenson line," said Coulbrooke. "It can have the line in it. It can have the line as a title. Or it can simply cite the line at the end as something that inspired the poem."

Poets can also choose their own inspiring Swenson line, she said.

There are few other rules for the poetry entries, said Coulbrooke. "We want writers to use their creative ability. May Swenson broke all the rules and used her creative ability to expand poetry in a lot of ways people hadn't thought of before."

Cash prizes were awarded: \$300 for first place, \$100 for second, and \$50 for two finalists. Winners will read their poems at the Swenson House groundbreaking at 1:30 p.m. Sept. 18. Email entries to [star.Coulbrooke@usu.edu](mailto:star.Coulbrooke@usu.edu).

Coulbrooke, who is the official Logan city poet laureate, will host a book-launch event for "Both Sides from the Middle," a collection of her poetry released in conjunction with the Swenson House groundbreaking. All proceeds from the book sale will be donated to the Swenson House. The book launch is at 6 p.m. Sept. 16, third floor of the Bluebird Restaurant in Logan. The event is free and open to the public.

To visit Coulbrooke official poet laureate page (and to read her poem presented to the city council Aug. 18) go to [http://www.loganutah.org/government/mayor\\_s\\_office/poet\\_laureate.php](http://www.loganutah.org/government/mayor_s_office/poet_laureate.php)

For more information on the Swenson House, see <http://chass.usu.edu/swenson-house/>

## Poem prompts

### Suggested May Swenson poems with prompt-lines highlighted in bold

#### The Poplar's Shadow

**When I was little, when  
the poplar was in leaf, its shadow made a sheaf,  
the quill of a great pen  
dark upon the lawn  
where I used to play.**

Grown, and long away  
into the city gone,  
I see the pigeons print  
a loop in air and, all  
their wings reversing, fall  
with silver undertint  
like poplar leaves, their seams  
in the wind blown.

#### **Time's other side, shown as a flipped coin, gleams on city ground**

when I see a pigeon's feather:  
little and large together,  
the poplar's shadow is found.

Starting at here,  
and superposing then,  
I wait for when.  
What shapes will appear?  
Will great birds swing  
over me like gongs?  
The poplar plume belongs  
to what enormous wing?

"A Cage Of Spines." *Collected Poems*, by May Swenson and Langdon Hammer, Library of America, 2013, pp. 81–82.

#### The Seed of My Father

**I rode on his shoulder. He showed me the moon.  
He told me its name with a kiss in my ear.  
"My moon," I said. "Yours," he agreed.  
And as we walked, it followed us home.**

Hold my hand, he showed me a tree,  
and picked a peach, and let me hold it.  
I took a bite, then he took a bite.  
"Ours?" I asked. "Yes, our tree."  
Then with a hoe he made the water flow beside it.

When I was older he showed me the sun.  
He made me a wooden wheel on a stick,  
of pine wood, raw and bright as the sun.  
I used to run and roll it.

**A flashing circular saw was the sun,**  
like the one he made my wheel with.  
"This little wheel belongs to me, the big one  
to you?" "Yes," he agreed, "just as we  
belong to the sun"  
He let me plant the corn grains one by one  
out of a long hollow slip-box thrust in the ground.  
"I who plant seeds for my father,  
I am the seed of my father."

And when the corn was tall, it swallowed me all up, all,  
whispering over my head. "You are the seed of your  
father."  
And when the husks were sere, my father with a rake,  
in the cold time of the year, made a bush of gold.

He struck the bush to burning for my sake.  
I stood at his shoulder, a little higher.  
I was the seed of my father, my father  
outlined by the fire.

He made a garden, and he planted me.  
Sun and moon he named and deeded to me.  
Water and fire he created, created me,  
he named me into being: I am the seed of my father.

His breath he gave me, he gave me night and day.  
His universe is in me fashioned from his clay.  
I feed on the juice of the peach from his eternal tree.  
Each poem I plant is a seedling from that tree.  
I plant the seed of my father.

"Selected Uncollected and Posthumously Published Poems." *Collected Poems*, by May Swenson and Langdon Hammer, Library of America, 2013, pp. 598–599.

#### Weather

**I hope they never get a rope on you, weather.  
I hope they never put a bit in your mouth.**  
I hope they never pack your snorts  
into an engine or make you wear wheels.

I hope the astronauts will always have to wait  
till you get off the prairie  
because your kick is lethal,  
your temper worse than the megaton.

**I hope your harsh mane will grow forever,  
and blow where it will,  
that your slick hide will always shiver  
and flick down your bright sweat.**

Reteach us terror, weather,  
with your teeth on our ships,  
your hoofs on our houses,  
your tail swatting our planes down like flies.

Before they make a grenade of our planet  
I hope you'll come like a comet,  
oh mustang—fire-eyes, upreared belly—  
bust the corral and stomp us to death.

*“Selected Uncollected and Posthumously Published Poems.” Collected Poems, by May Swenson and Langdon Hammer, Library of America, 2013, pp. 606.*

### It Rains

It rains  
Write a rain poem  
it Stops  
Write a stop poem  
Shit  
Write a shit poem  
I love you  
Write a love poem  
Die  
Write a dead poem  
Fight  
Write a fight poem  
Hate

Write a hate poem

Write  
Write a write poem  
Wait  
Make a wait poem  
Sleep

sleep a poem  
Wake a poem

*“Iconographs.” Collected Poems, by May Swenson and Langdon Hammer, Library of America, 2013, pp. 306.*

### To a Dark Girl

**Lie still and let me love you  
first with my eyes**  
that feast upon you  
as on deep skies  
to count the constellations  
Below your breast Andromeda  
Orion and the rest

Lie still and let me love you  
now with my hands  
that dream over your body  
as in wondrous lands  
skiers ascend to snow-smooth hollows  
where silence speaks

Lie still and let me love you  
with my mouth  
pressed among strange flowers  
elixirs of the south  
to drink their dewy musk  
or like rich grapes  
I nuzzle with my lips  
until their wine escapes

Lie still and let me love you  
with all my weight  
urgent upon you  
Deep-keeled elate  
my body greets you a leaping boat  
challenging your tide  
to be the stronger  
And not afloat  
lie still no longer  
**Demand I love you  
the more the more  
while passion's breakers  
bear us to their shore.**

*“Selected Uncollected and Posthumously Published Poems.” Collected Poems, by May Swenson and Langdon Hammer, Library of America, 2013, pp. 559—560.*

### What I Did on a Rainy Day

Breathed the fog from the valley  
 Inhaled its either fumes  
 With whittling eyes peeled the hills  
 to their own blue and bone  
 Swallowed piercing pellets of rain  
 Caught cloudful in one colorless cup  
 Exhaling stung the earth with sunlight  
 Struck leaf and bristle to green fire  
 Turned tree trunks to gleaming pillars  
 and twigs to golden nails  
**With one breath taken into the coils  
 of my blood and given again when vibrant  
 I showed who's god around here**  
 "Selected Uncollected and Posthumously Published  
 Poems." *Collected Poems*, by May Swenson and Langdon  
 Hammer, Library of America, 2013, pp. 564.

### Cause & Effect

**Am I the bullet  
 or the target  
 or the hand  
 that holds the gun?**  
 Or the whisper  
 in the brain saying aim, fire?  
 Is the bullet innocent though it kill?  
 Must the target stand unblinking and still?  
 Can one escape, the other stop, if it will?  
 Will the trigger-finger obey through force?  
 If the hand reverse command,  
 will the pregnant gun abort its course?  
 The brain,  
 the brain, surely it can refrain  
 unclench the gun, break open  
 the pod of murder,  
 let the target rise and run.  
 But first the whisper must be caught,  
 before the shot—  
 the single wasp be burnt out,  
 before the nest, infested, swarms with  
 the multiple thought—  
 each sting the trigger pressed!

"A Cage of Spines." *Collected Poems*, by May Swenson and Langdon  
 Hammer, Library of America, 2013, pp. 82.

### The Universe

What  
 is it about,  
 the universe,  
 the universe about us stretching out?  
 We within our brains  
 within it  
 think  
 we must unspin  
 the laws that spin it.  
***we think why  
 because we think  
 because.***  
***Because we think,  
 we think  
 the universe is about us.***

But does *it* think,  
 the universe?  
 Then what about?  
 about us?  
 If not,  
 Must there be cause  
 in the universe?  
 Must it have laws?  
**and what  
 if the universe  
 is not about us?**  
**Then what?**  
**What  
 is it about?**  
**And what  
 about us?**

"To Mix With Time." *Collected Poems*, by May Swenson and Langdon  
 Hammer, Library of America, 2013, pp. 141.