For our final essay of this course, I have chosen “Water Picture,” by May Swenson. I chose this piece, out of may really great pieces, because it was just so lovely. It is very unique with such simple imagery that, despite its simplicity, engages the reader and gently guides them into a new mindset ripe for seeing normalcy through a new, different, and enticing lens.

This poem, for me, is like verbal photography - the great kind of photography that takes you out of the mundanity of the day-to-day and makes that day-to-day exciting, new, refreshing, and wondrous. Something to look for, to long for, to get excited for. A great photo can take a coke bottle and make it seem like it came from somewhere that is a combination of nostalgia and deja-vu. Somewhere that is dream-like remembered, yet real and tangible. Something that you hope to never overlook again. To me, “Water Picture” does exactly that. I strongly believe that I, having read it, will never be able to look at a pond in the same way ever again. In fact, I may never be able to look at a washbasin of water in the same way, or a dish sink full with rinsing water. This poem has - hopefully - permanently made an alteration of my perception of reflections found on the still surface of water.

“Water Picture” is a poem whose tone is whimsical and fun. It isn't giddy, or silly, per se, but it is light and easy going. With imagery like “...a pink balloon for a buoy...” the narrator takes the reader to a “...pond in the park...” where “all things are doubled”
for a view that is intended to be different than what is to be expected, but definitely safe.

In this piece, there needs be no concern for where one is going. We are taken to this park and allowed to see how active and interesting the park is when looking at it, and its inhabitants, with an upside down lens actively included, augmenting our perceptions to include both the “normal” and the “bizarre” (to steal common vernacular from comic book lore) in a safe and friendly way.

Written in four stanzas, the poem begins with a matter-of-fact setting of the scene.

In the pond in the park
all things are doubled:

This seems apropos to the whole theme in that it is matter of fact and not overtly florid. The writer, in this poem, seems to have a knack for keeping things tied to a “normalcy” while broadening the idea of normal through the use of literal perspective.

The rest of the first stanza falls into the pattern of the bulk of the piece, and the second and third stanzas are wholly devoted to describing the upside down world. The forth stanza starts with the same pattern but, once we hit the final four lines, we see another shift that (uncertainly) turns the scene into something different, like a rock being thrown into the fragile world, or a rain storm starting. We have this strangely backwards world thrown into disarray with:

and all the scene is troubled.
water-windows splinter,
tree-limbs tangle, the bridge folds like a fan.
The stanzas lend themselves to being individual scenes, or views of the park’s pond - verbal photographs taken while resting on a nearby swatch of grass, or maybe a bench, each one of the pictures having merit, feeling, and story of their own, each being a lone work of art. Then, when put side by side, they expand into, and compliment each other beautifully, like if one were to quarter a panoramic shot.

While the reader never formally meets the narrator, one gets the impression that it is someone that is known and trusted - maybe even one’s self. S/He could be sitting right next to you or could have written you a quick letter that came with explicit instructions to DO NOT READ until properly seated on the appropriate park bench. It could also be the voice inside your own head as you sit there, whiling away the time, enjoying a lattè. All one knows for sure is that the words are metered - to use a technical term - perfectly and that the tone and subject keeps a decided focus on how the normal doesn’t have to be.

Swenson is clearly a fan of metaphor. Upon reading, one sees how she takes a unique view to the use of balloons, the anatomy of chimneys, what one uses to catch a fish. When not using metaphor, the speaker is redefining the natural ways-of-things by transforming the trees’ fruit and its roots and enlightening the reader with the true, “wriggl[ing],” architectural structuring of “Long buildings.” Other examples of the artistry captured are the depictions of “glass bowl” hills and double-necked swans.

Titling the poem “Water Picture” was, simply, inspired. It is further evidence of the thought that went into this piece and seems to give just enough of an accurate hint into the piece’s content and intent. Whether Swenson underwent hours of painstaking
debate over the title or let it come to her naturally - like the poem seems to - is important only inasmuch as it satisfies someone who loves to know such details. One could never guess with confidence because of its seamless integration with the body of the composition.

Finding that the Swenson was born in Utah, to a large Mormon family, makes these lines that much easier to soak in and appreciate. Even though she was raised in the Northern part of Utah, a local can easily see her sitting at their neighborhood park as she breathed this touching, and touched, piece of written photography into life. Thank you, May Swenson, for making my perception take a much needed turn down a less-familiar-than-I-realized path.