

1998

# Hammered Dulcimer

Lisa Williams

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Poetry  
Award  
Series  
*May  
Swenson*



# The Hammered Dulcimer

*poems by  
Lisa Williams*

foreword by  
John Hollander

THE  
HAMMERED  
DULCIMER



May Swenson  
Poetry Award Series

THE  
HAMMERED  
DULCIMER

*poems*  
*by*

Lisa Williams

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## FOREWORD

LISA WILLIAMS'S POEMS OFTEN START OUT IN SONG AND END IN EPISTEMOLOGY, but they frequently break out into a kind of humming in the course of walking their self-generated routes. They manifest a fine ear for not only the rhythms of verse in English but for those of the argument that makes them. She can deploy, as in the poem and the lovely "A Story of Swans," a delicately modulated unrhymed anapestic trimeter (which in less skilled hands might degenerate into damped jingle), or can, as frequently elsewhere, rightly speak in tercets framed in conventional short-lined free verse and make them resonate with her own "tone of meaning," as Frost put it.

They extend a line of powerfully and actively contemplative poetry that marks some of the finest American verse of the twentieth century. One hears in so many of the poems in *The Hammered Dulcimer* an original voice modulating a major wavelength generated by Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery; one sees in them the continuing emergence of parable from sensuous presence, of meaning from things and conditions and configurations in which it had been lurking. "A Forward Spring" is perhaps central as well as typical in this matter; with an almost Marianne Moore-like resolve, its conclusion acknowledges the lesson taught by the most basic of cyclical rhythms to the moral imagination—awakening, whether of spring or consciousness—bequeaths if not what Hart Crane called "an embassy," then certainly a project:

I saw it so clearly,  
how the spring admitted winter  
but didn't retract.  
What they call the sublime  
doesn't look away  
but looks *at*, boldly examines  
the obscure impediments  
to what it wants; sees  
itself, sees what lies ahead  
of itself, and goes forth . . .

This poet's realm is that of a guarded wonder in which questions can seem less problematic than answers, and in which the meditative process, the turning of a formulation over and over again, becomes ever more analogous to the breathing rhythms of life itself, on the one hand, and to the controlled and constructed rhythms—and there are so many different sorts of rhythm there—of poetic formulation. Wallace Stevens remarked in one of his aphorisms (which I've always wanted to see as the first line of an Emily Dickinson quatrain) "there is no wing like meaning," and I would adduce it not only with respect to that fine poem, "In the Abstract," but to the whole of *The Hammered Dulcimer* (and is that instrument something of a southern, damselled, harmonium?) as well. It is most appropriate that Lisa Williams's work receive an award in the name of that profoundly original poet May Swenson, for this is not only a more-than-promising first book but introduces an original way of looking at the world, and of looking at that very looking itself. It is a pleasure to greet it.

John Hollander

*“Sing unto him a new song;  
play skillfully with a loud noise.”*



THE  
HAMMERED  
DULCIMER



## THE DIRECTION OF SHADOW

At night, the arrows of our fortune  
point up and point down.  
Black and inelastic,  
slanted but not like sunlight,  
taut as a heron's foot  
or a string about to break  
are the arrows of the fortune  
we do not create.

The arrows of our fortune  
cannot be touched, except  
when a hand interrupts  
their soft black filaments  
on the ground, and the skin's  
color, brushed with absence,  
suddenly dims—

Magnificent  
are the arrows of our fortune  
when the shadows of huge trees,  
slender, pillared, excellent,  
form them. Like the doorway  
of a new religion  
they open something  
but what?

To the arrows of our fortune  
something sometimes happens:  
the force of the arrow  
slings past its shadow  
which drops  
on the grass, on the ground,  
heavy as a man.

What is left behind,  
what flaps in the wind,  
is not it at all—  
not the vibrant quiver,

nor the impenetrable mark,  
nor the piercing matter.

The man falls on the grass.  
His shadow joins him.  
The goal dissolves in space.  
A force flies through the universe,  
winged in flame.  
It is a game  
where nothing wins  
and everything of course is lost.

## SUNDAY MORNING

So this is beginning:  
day entering the long field  
voiced and plumed,  
noise entering the mind's  
accruelement of dream.  
It is always a struggle,  
the constant waking  
from inward pattern  
to outward motion,  
from sleep to distraction  
and back again.  
While around us, the sounds  
of so much affluence,  
details prickling the air,  
a sensory cacophony  
of things and more things  
lifted out of despair,  
the black rush of distance.  
What does it matter  
how true they are?  
These are what we wait for,  
this multiplicity  
of throats and feathers,  
a busy consciousness  
landing on the rigid bushes  
and windblown grasses,  
cattails nodding in assent  
as if they understood  
the physical completely.  
I sit on a porch

looking out at the morning  
and it feels like a precipice  
between the known and the unknown.

It seems a miracle  
that we are not always afraid,  
our many thoughts crowding

the singular present,  
an untidy flock  
without tangible wings

in a tangible mist,  
sweeping in from the cold  
to shriek of vividness.

The mind would carry the world off  
but where would it land?

The real is landlord here,

you can smell it in the wind  
although, if the dew is to be believed,  
this field is primed

and open, it is vulnerable  
to the claws of possibility,  
to the multicolored being

intertwined with rays of sun.

It will come over the mountain,  
flying, flying,

while the two halves of the self—

one the resting body,  
the other the mind unable

to lie on the ground—  
stay on their precipice,  
inextricable twins

that do not understand  
what they have come to find  
but willing to wait for something  
partly sublime.

## INTERRUPTION OF FLIGHT

The woman with no feet sits on the porch.  
Before her, on the new-mown lawn,  
her son polishes his motorcycle  
until its chrome facets gleam  
under the sun, display a world  
playing on surfaces, things shining along  
and across, their parameters warped,  
motions churning and strange. The tall trees  
fringe space, fringe the blue  
with its frills of white mist,  
its patched lace. The old woman  
watches over the humming engine  
while her son revs it up,  
dark roar in our ears full of wind.  
The space around shapes  
is of interest, the space between leaves  
imprecise, planes of pale air notched  
by the green, a geometry raised,  
what might be an angle  
interrupted by branches grown past  
*plain*. The woman's legs jut out:  
one longer, cut off below the knee,  
the other lost mid-thigh. And above,  
the air writhes with birds, the sky's alive  
with flying into, flying through.  
Robins, dark robins, and sparrows,  
like strong priests, loop together  
the light between edges,  
gathering sense, making of the jaggedness  
something defined only by feeling.  
Or the crowd of the self's lifting off,  
carrying an image it believes  
is immense. Now the woman  
with feet made of air, with no speech,  
is being helped out of a car.

(When did she disappear?)  
“Lean forward. *Lean forward*,” the son orders.  
(I was watching the birds.)  
“*Push yourself out! Push yourself out!*”  
And the world above words, the real sky  
trailed by robins, by two crows  
and by fat pigeons scuttling  
the attic, feathering the heart’s box.  
One particular tree across the street  
from the woman with no feet  
stands in front of me. In the tree’s  
knotted limb is a hole, and in that waits  
an additional hunger  
deepening. Sparrows dart  
in and out of the hole in the limb  
where the restless chicks wait  
with black throats. The parents  
are solicitous, swooping down  
every few minutes. They will not stop  
so much emptiness, or the young naked song,  
song so sure of the spirit’s  
primacy, of the terrible wish.  
“*Good job. That makes it easier on everyone.*”  
Now the brusque son has placed his mother  
in a wheelchair, pushed her back to the porch  
where she’ll sit and observe  
the sun’s anger increase,  
the mechanical fruit. And her feet made of air  
have flown off with my heart  
like the birds who are priests.  
May we scatter in peace.

## YELLOW BIRD

Where, oh where, has my yellow bird gone?  
Has he gone to the ocean? Has he gone to the town?

*He has stitched up the steeple with hardly a sound  
and the bells haven't rung, haven't rung.*

Where, oh where, has my yellow bird gone?  
Does he sing in the orchard? Does he sleep by the pond?

*He has plucked a black spider and swallowed it down  
and he leaves its torn web on the ground.*

Where, oh where, has my yellow bird gone?  
Have his feathers been scattered, like leaves in the wind?

*He has flown to the well where his shadow falls in  
as he lands on the stones of its rim.*

Where, oh where, has my little life gone?  
Have I nothing to guide me, and cold days to come?

*I have seen his bright body approaching the sun  
and his feathers have turned into flame.*

WHAT THE WIND SAID  
TO THE GIRL WHO WAS AFRAID

When he comes for you, that dark gentleman, fear,  
tell him you already know him,  
that you're not the foolish bride that he thinks,  
that even in the crevices and chinks  
of your own mind, things get carried away.  
That you gaze into the arms  
of trees, into a vacant night  
where desire tears every dream apart.  
That you walk on a path and hope it will stray.  
That each twist from what's safe breaks a wish  
like a curious seed  
where the weeds of the wilderness mesh.  
He can have the run of your house.  
He can have the ruin of your grace.  
He and the sadness that keeps circling nearer,  
like a song you were born with and slowly remember,  
like a song you were humming, and later divine.  
That fine-limbed and bold as the delicate deer  
on the gold hill at morning, whose legs turn to stone  
at a sound, but who doesn't stop chewing the leaf  
on its tongue while its body stands frozen, aware,  
you believe in the constant infringement of pleasure.  
You believe in the hill of your pleasure, not fear.  
You too will not run. Your life will be moving  
its teeth when he comes. He'll be bitten in half  
while the wind in your spirit whips over the grass.  
Oh how pure is that wind! It runs harder and faster  
than death. It runs like a silvery fox,  
like a flourish of foxes who don't have a doubt.  
And you will push fear, that dark gentleman, out.

## THE FALL

For Milton's Satan  
heaven was a chill place,  
too much already realized.

He had nothing to taste.  
What he hadn't yet seen  
seemed to him like real paradise.

Sometimes, beauty means  
an ecstatic indifference  
that freezes the heart.

It is cold. It is cold.  
And it stays on its throne.  
But you have to begin,  
as a woman begins  
when she turns from observing  
the face of her youth

in a glass or a mirror—  
the face she had once.  
It's that turn to existence  
when you stop thinking *Am I?*  
or *Should I?* or *When?*  
but instead, *I'm outside*  
*the cold dreaming of heaven.*  
*I have fallen at last,*  
and you enter the world.

## THE TENDERNESS

*for Neil*

A strong doe running with her young  
is an unfathomable thing. In this late light  
the trees form a craggy embrace

for her searching, and nothing's at rest.  
Not the hill, not the fawn she defends,  
not the pasture of clover and grass

but pursuance of movement itself  
is her meaning—the absence of stone.  
From embankment to thicket to lawn

that running must be her existence.  
Sometimes she is splintered. Sometimes  
her own child and its tenderness catches

on the adamant surface of flight—  
We are lucky to come upon this  
as we barrel headlong through the world

in our hard, narrow armor of self,  
to come upon some kind of tenderness  
turned, for a moment, to us.

Even if we stand defenseless  
and certain to lose what we want,  
we are lucky to notice her stop

in the grey morning mist, the sharp upward  
incline to the heart of our forest,  
this fleeting but palpable guest.

## THE HAMMERED DULCIMER

The novice can't use her hands well.  
Their frailty reminds her of twigs  
but she tries to make sounds. First she holds,  
very lightly, between timid fingers,  
the foreign, cool weight of a hammer  
(so small) made of maple or spruce  
and nervously taps several strings.  
Her next notes aren't crystalline bells  
but splintered, exploding, with trouble,  
the questions discordance inspires.  
*Is this me? Will the painful get better?*  
The girl sits alone in a room,  
or else she's surrounded by faces.  
No matter. She's lost in the order  
her flapping hands make: tiny errors  
eked out of her into the air  
that crash on her body like water.  
But the fine strings lie under each hammer.  
Over those, her bent body casts shadow,  
a flat but imperious shadow  
more sprawling, more dark, than the dulcimer's  
wood. Oh the intimate shadow!  
A raven hunched down in late sun  
in her yard closes wings not in prayer  
but downward, to heed small dark thoughts.  
This raven, which seems nihilistic,  
shifts and flickers: green, indigo, violet,  
as if some new garden were opened  
in darkness to please the great sun  
who sits on her throne of blue weather.

More slowly, an insect discovers  
rough orange wings, bright green feet, whatever  
its form needs to burst into song.

And the raven believes it is best.  
And the insect has found its own rhythm,  
a low parchment hum, as the dulcimer  
responds to her troublesome fingers  
(or responds to the small wooden hammers,  
for through those, she must reach the fine strings).

The girl's back stays turned on the shadow  
which hulks in the wings of her music  
while the people in mind or around her,

growing bored now, begin to complain:  
"This novice's noises make trouble.  
We want more than all her harsh fumbling.

We want her to play a *real* song."  
But she finds this new failure exciting,  
as if minor spaces broke open

in the sounds she thought major, complete.  
So she tries to ignore the pale sounds  
of the people who murmur in protest;

it's essential her effort be focused  
not on song, but on what guides her heart  
through resemblances plucked on the strings . . .

The flat shadow waits. It expects  
her to straighten. She's turned to the dulcimer  
though the people are drifting away,

drifting far from the fields discord brings,  
and the raven, the intricate insect,  
are nestled in burgeoning trees.

"We know what we like," think the people.  
*You're playing it wrong*, cries the dulcimer.  
A chord hovers over the strain.

## COMPLAINT

There is no mother in this night,  
only the trees, with their strong backs,  
their proud chests curved over the creek.

There is no mother. Why did we think  
if we walked into darkness we would find her?  
Why did I think

if I asked you for nothing, you would find me?  
Walking into darkness is like  
walking into an absence of questions:

there's a kind of peace settling down,  
an inestimable reference,  
a lack of desperation.

The wind goes on its way.  
The eyes move through the grass.  
Description takes its place

piece by piece, loss by loss.  
There is no mother in this night  
which pours its warm limbs over us

like a lover without motive,  
without hidden interests,  
like a lover that simply is.

It is good, how the self exists  
and would be centered, strong, and proud  
in its own right.

EVE, AFTER EATING

It had nothing to do with God,  
what had made her  
plunge her teeth into fate,  
and nothing to do with hunger.  
The shape of her lust  
was not one of those globed fruits.  
Nor was the pleasure  
of pulp on her tongue  
as simple as Truth  
spilling seeds in the mind.  
The snake wasn't so clever,  
"Empress" this, "Goddess" that.  
She saw through his compliments.  
It was simply a choice,  
to open an error,  
to pluck from the branch  
of knowledge and abundance  
as it had been defined.  
Her mouth filled with juice.  
Her blood filled with song.  
*The plant at the center,  
the growth in the heart,  
the self and its lover,  
are joined in this art . . .*  
A strange afternoon.  
Afterwards,  
she lay on the ground  
listening to the wind  
as it paused in the orchards,  
hoping they wouldn't come yet  
—death, god, the man.  
She needed to think for a while,  
and to learn.

MAN WALKING

In the evening when walking  
he looks on the scene  
with an eye full of time.

*See*, say the trees standing tall.  
*Us*, say the clouds floating high.  
*Aim*, say the stalks in a row.

And he wants to drift up  
where the first twigs erupt  
in the bright, in the cold,  
where their cracklings delineate  
finer and finer  
small strokes of intent—

like an orderly art.  
In the evening when walking  
he looks on the scene  
with its blue simple light  
and would like to be bold.  
*Here*, says the burgeoning mud.

*You*, say the houses of wood.  
*Move*, says the moon to its kind  
through the branches that cover the mind  
and it goes when he goes,  
and it stops when he stops,  
like a rhyme.

## BLACK HORSES

Black horses on a yellow hill  
against a clouded sky.  
How can desire go unfulfilled  
or run from you and I—  
Not run, but simply wander past  
as if it had the wish  
to find a greener circumstance  
beyond our small request.  
Black horses on a yellow hill  
so stalwart, so serene.  
What the heart may want today  
does not a lifetime mean.  
Longing, like those bodies dark  
and curved with skin and bone,  
may find a hill, may find a dale,  
but not a solid home.  
Black horses on a yellow hill  
against a clouded sky.  
Not any creature, good or ill,  
can calculate the eye.

## THE GROWTH

I heard a weed cry in a dream  
*let me in, let me in.*  
It grew on a hill outside my window,  
was gnawed by cicadas, taunted by crows,  
but still had five leaves  
large as tortoises, and near the earth  
a stem rotted brown. How the roots thrived  
I couldn't guess, but in my dream  
the weed bent its stem and slid  
down to the luminescent pane  
next to my bed, where I lay thinking  
about pain. I saw its fringed head  
nod. I saw the liquid drum  
through its huge green vein.  
It looked and looked at my infant life  
until I felt my heart crack,  
disintegrate, and swell up in my throat  
like a brilliant adventure  
that hadn't yet occurred.  
And I woke up and whispered  
(for the dark seemed fruitless)  
*Oh rancid, blooming mystery,  
how long before your messenger  
will come for me?*

MANNERS, 1977

My grandmother took me for a ride  
in her brand new turquoise glide  
of a car, with doors for fins.

We sank in the fabulous plush,  
soft leather like family skin,  
the windows opening at will.

Wish had become mechanical.  
My grandmother steered the way  
through complicated streets,

through the old, Southern sights.  
We moved in clouds of blue:  
hot blue, Amazon River blue.

We were partners in luxury.  
The sidewalks jumped, then disappeared.  
Birds sprang in various directions.

We were calm. We didn't care.  
There were tiny, tree-lined roads,  
and streets of rowdy schoolchildren.

We passed the hospital, the pharmacy,  
the house behind the highest fence,  
another house we'd lived in once,

its same old willow weeping.  
My grandmother had silver hair  
that dazzled anyone who noticed.

She'd worked for years at duty.  
The Lincoln suited her slow beauty.  
We passed, serenely,

our favorite, blooming neighborhoods,  
vast mansions we would never enter  
—that is, would never see together.

The sun was certain; the sky one view.  
No news of what lay just ahead.  
Or was it miles and miles of pleasure  
as we stretched our azure limbs?  
Only my dazzling grandmother  
could make the whole town take us in.  
She taught me then (and many  
years of colors later)  
what distinctive manners meant.

## A SPIDER

So many lines about the wind I weave.  
So many lines, some of them taut  
with particular gestures, some of them caught  
on the edge of a house, or torn  
and flapping in a violent storm.  
So many thought-weighted, rock-ripped, time-worn  
in the obstructed present.  
No two the same, none spun as magnificently  
as I aim them to be, most blown away.  
All I can do is wind what courses through  
my spirit, trembling instrument—old battered frame  
on which the elements pour, play on, accrue  
(I'd call it a lyre, but that would be too gay)  
then send those filaments of soul  
into sheer absence, needling the material  
with a pronged and strange capacity.  
The lines I make begin to shake things free  
and yet fold brilliant glimmers of their colors  
into a tapestry both false and brave.  
At first, I only grasped the threads of others  
but soon learned all would break, and none would save.  
So many lines about the wind I weave.

## THE MAN BY THE RIVER

The man by the river let no one in.  
The man by the river grew pale and thin.  
He lived in a house on the edge of the woods  
where the marsh wind blows and the dark creeps in.

On days of sun he'd stay inside  
and pace, and question himself out loud  
why his true love left, why his mother died,  
why a vulture circled the wide blue sky.

On days the air turned damp and dim  
he'd walk from his house and the wind-tossed pines  
down his father's hill to the changing strand  
where waves of green met grains of sand.

The wind plucked on an instrument  
that no one human hand could fit.  
He watched the restless sea and land  
find lines of truth to move beyond.

He watched the waves sweep twigs and bones  
to shore, and sweep them back again  
more fragile from the dry, hot sun.  
The wind rolled dreams along the sand.

The light passed over his youth one day.  
And flocks of dark birds lighted down  
each year for the seeds on his father's land  
and the berries that clung to his father's tree.

## BANQUET

The daffodils are expectant.  
On the fringes of Spring  
they are waiting.  
*Be glad. Spread cheer.*  
*Do not let the fabric*  
*of joy disappear.*  
Benevolence  
must be like this, appearing  
suddenly on the margins  
of our lust for change.  
It is close. Too close.  
We grow used to it  
with its colors and bells,  
its bright, slippered feet.  
*Delight, delight,*  
*the soul is right,*  
say the daffodils. Tonight  
may be their last. The meadows  
confused with praise  
—warm mild days—  
then the crotchety winter  
laying his rough hands  
on the flower beds.  
What is it he wants with them?  
Their hopes are not hidden.  
They open themselves  
completely,  
as if they want to be touched,  
gold empty cups  
for someone to fill.  
They are not so innocent.  
They would feel and feel.  
The liquor they offer  
is consciousness.  
Even if he drains them,

even if he destroys  
their silks and stems,  
he will have to go home  
eventually, he will have to retreat  
from the garden alone.  
Of this, they're aware.

## TO NIGHT

I don't want to be afraid of you  
and yet I am.  
You are the tapestry  
of my mortality.  
You are the arbor of sound  
when sound is through with me,  
threats and grasses plaited through your hem.  
And in the deeper places,  
the center I can't thumb,  
there are colors, chants,  
descriptionless  
wild faces.

If you are a woman  
you have burdens.  
You were never light.  
Socrates felt that night  
was when we start to see,  
when the philosophers  
emptied their hands  
of common pleasure:  
no figs on plates,  
or wine,  
or wordless measure,  
just perfect quiet  
as the soul sinks  
and wisdom rises  
from the lower kingdom  
where she holds court  
with her noble spirits . . .  
She would not abandon  
the light of the mind  
that had shown  
such graces—  
and Socrates was about to die  
when he explained this.

## ON THE NATURE OF BEAUTY

There are so many edges to things:  
this lamp, this wall, this table.  
Tonight, even a question  
has clean dimensions. Outside, sounds rise  
through aisles of grass,  
ridges of bark, larva, wings.  
There are so many edges to things;  
for instance, the tablet of dusk  
has been broken into pieces  
by darkening trees  
or whittled, maybe, by an old artiste  
sitting on his porch in the sky.  
Who is in love with wholes,  
with the blurred manteau  
of evening, eternally floating down  
over every brittle figure,  
turning them into the ground?  
Who wouldn't rather create a figure,  
regal, discontinuous,  
surreal and extraneous,  
but as essential to the sky  
as the eye is?  
On land, there are so many edges,  
we have to hold on to them  
dearly, they become our anthem,  
what we run our tongues over,  
what we run our hands over,  
the bodies we touch,  
the lines we engage,  
even the loves we leave behind  
to move onto the hard, lonely stage  
we are always on the verge of.  
We do not really want to be saved  
from the shortcomings  
of hands. We do not want the whole,  
serene, mellifluous, unscaled,

though we may strive to get a look at it.  
So when we find the beautiful,  
whatever it may mean,  
however it is changing,  
we feel the presence of something  
(maybe it is wings)  
sprouting, prickling, burning,  
giving us the edges again  
of our own limited range,  
spurring the fenced-in being  
—when we lay eyes on it,  
the beautiful,  
the thing that stops our heart,  
the act that seems worth a good try,  
and it is, even for a minute,  
that being ready to fly.

## ROMANTIC RELIEF

The trees look like women in beautiful dresses,  
the blue sky their background of cloudy excesses.

*To be all alone in a difficult world*

*is not what we're fearing.* They dangle their tresses  
as if they were women with answers, not guesses.

*To be all alone in the world isn't hard.*

These plunges of feeling, these lithe, stubborn branches  
of brown and bright green, these decorative phrases  
that seem like a frivolous dance in the mind . . .

*We know how to be with ourselves in the world*

say the women. They move to an army of breezes.

Who cares if there's not a whole army of words,

strong soldiers, to take the slim trees in their arms  
and lavish their bodies with verbal caresses  
until they are calm? Who cares if a world

where the soldiers, the women, the phrases are held,  
isn't real? *We stay with ourselves and are charmed.*

The trees are grown women and innocent guesses

and words in the air and abstractions and bards  
of some deeply historical verse in the heart.

The women are laughing. The branches grow firm,  
the green leaves transgressive. *We all fall apart.*

## NEGATION

The self does not find itself in the long road.  
The self does not find itself in the dimming sky.  
The self does not find itself in the couple with the baby  
who smile as if they know where, when, and why,  
nor in the mountains rising heavily  
like the bent backs of monks, indifferent and old,  
nor in the ruddy vegetable garden  
where a figure works quietly, at the center of the world.

What it is not seems to have no end.  
A river of silence is all it contains,  
winding and winding through mysterious forests.  
Maybe it is better not to see what is missed,  
to just float on the surface of billowing dusk  
where distinguishing edges are melting like lovers  
and the air turns a dense and improbable hue  
softening, for a minute, the absence of an 'I' and a 'You.'

## LANDSCAPE

In the neighborhood of sorrow  
we move because we grieve.  
The houses are low and squat,  
the air heavy, the boughs gnarled  
with bending toward light.  
If you walk along that winding street  
shadowed by fate  
you might hear music  
drifting out of a window, someone playing  
not quite well, not quite badly,  
a tune that means nothing to you.  
In the neighborhood of sorrow  
things go about their business:  
the birds, bees, etcetera,  
almost indivisible  
from the monotone sky  
except for a small cry  
here and there, the casual humming  
of eternity. In the underbrush  
you'll still find the twining, lush  
insistence of a life—  
these vines, for example,  
coiled around what's young  
and delicate: birch, ash, Virginia pine—  
but that's just denial  
doing what it can.  
At one house, a cat  
lays a truth from the forest  
on the doorstep—a dead infant snake,  
raw stomach, smooth new back

of yellow gems. The practiced griever  
opens the door  
to find it, then throws it in the garden,  
its 's' shape of despair  
landing lightly on the weeds  
and sprung impatiens. Knowledge  
spreads into the background  
and day begins.  
Across great distance, the whine  
of a saw, someone taking care  
of chaos. Elsewhere,  
someone isn't.

A WIND IN PLACE

*after Stevens*

The day is green and blown  
but her mother was strong  
as these trees bending in the wind.

The clouds are full of avowals  
but her father had the clarity  
of rain-scrubbed altitudes.

There is nothing whom can't change  
but the buried, nothing it can't sway  
but the ground.

Now their thoughts are thinnest air  
above the tangle of intelligence.  
Now their touch drifts

blurred and down.

The wall between the self and wind  
is just a limited perception, the eye's redress.

In the wide light,  
in the blaring continuity of it,  
over the dark and scrambled green,  
white blooms like sudden freedoms  
lift the harsh bark  
as possibility raises the eye up  
from its body, distinguishes its backdrop  
from ordinary scenes  
and from the leaves, those same spun leaves  
that weigh the branches down.  
But in between the wind and eye  
is the interrupting wall  
and the figure in place behind it  
who sees the lashed events  
and feels unsafe.

## CRATER

Old moon, old moon,  
what do I tell you?  
You sit there, scribed with night.

Do you expect invention?  
Beauty as its own reign  
or arrangement? No praise  
then, just this stutter  
between stare and star, the imprint  
of my heel on relative dark.

Fool moon, fool moon,  
what do you know  
of me or my crumbled ladders?

You're not a smile, or a grimace,  
you're not even a leap,  
just some bruited glow

that hangs from its one  
dichotomy. You can't figure  
the tunes, the variant

weights on a tongue.  
Poor moon, poor moon,  
what does your one eye mean?

To have half a sense,  
a cruel bright, your whole vision  
wandering, or dispersed

into clueless trinkets  
you can never collect.  
Won't you always be

swivelling? Bold mood, your flood  
is the flood of the mind  
in its black habit:

lighting all, but uplifted by none.  
Lantern of the odd soul,  
miner of discontent,  
don't come out, don't come out.  
Stay hidden, in my cold coat  
pocket.

ON A WORM DESCENDING A THREAD

This gray light is full of invention,  
of the rustling of feathers and hues.  
There are voices no language can sing.

The sun dips its face in the dark,  
in the alternate substance, the mirror.  
It is listening. It listens to water

and it follows that sound to the sea  
where the moon waits, the delicate daughter,  
earth's eldest, who sprang out of grief

and flew off through the torn, broken trees,  
past the ferns, past the sisterly branches,  
past the swan's neck, the forest of eyes  
and of wounds, and adjusted her grace  
to a height, to a distance, where sorrow  
can turn from its body, not touch.

Her departure has scattered a shell  
in the sea, has inflected the deep  
murk of absence with silvery scales

that will brush an oiled brethren all night.  
*We are light, we are light*, dream the fish  
as the water rings out and away.

*Since the darkness will flood into me,  
I will rise and give birth to myself.  
Oh what veils I'll remove as I go!*

thinks the moon. She has thrown off her grief  
and is able to shine on most nights,  
then returns to a river of doubt.

Those below her must travel with care.  
They must follow their stream to the end.  
They must follow the stream of their listening . . .

and the grey light is full of invention,  
and the soul rides the question, its string  
in the musical night. The soul rides  
on a frail and invisible thread  
or a sound. *How it twists in the air!*  
laughs the moon, looking pale, looking wan.

## A STORY OF SWANS

The young girl's description of swans  
is the story of swans that begins,  
"As the cool lilies cover the water,  
as a mellow sun gilds the wet banks,  
the young man and the woman hold hands . . ."  
Not the story that, glistening, rises  
with algae and mud on her skin,  
that is scratched by rough sedges and weeds.  
Not the story where mirrors come in,  
where a lack of them, in the pond's surface,  
keeps wisdom from seeing her face.  
*Now the serpent, the subtilist creature,*  
*lurks deep in the body of hosts.*  
I could tell her about the white raven  
turned black for its criminal tongue,  
for its shrewd and dividing intelligence  
and the depth of its throat, like wild space.  
How its feathers were too dim to last  
in the air of such space. But her swan  
is eternal, with calm, dipping suns  
and a castle beyond. The rare swan!  
When it floats, it floats holding its wings  
firmly down. And the fermented gold  
of the sun pours a mead on its skin,  
on its feathers, those odd, ancient flutes  
that will ferry grief out and away  
through the qualms of each figure, the myths  
of each word that encircles the pond.  
*Will you enter? The pond is obscure.*  
There is something about empty space,

the mistake of a hollow that charms her,  
that tempts her. She peers into holes,  
any hole; a cement crack, a drainpipe.

I watch her. She bends lower. Squats  
to consider the back of that throat.

*When you lie on your back in the dark*

*you will hear it come breathing, come breathing,  
the fear, not the one you adore.*

*When your doubts rose, it rose. It had seen*

*you grow soft, like a powerless swan.*

I could tell her about the young prince,  
the bold son of the sun king, who begged

to take off in his father's fierce coach  
wanting fire of his own. How the horses  
who carried the light were confused

and flew higher and higher, afraid.

He fell terribly free of the coach.

He fell flaming and far into water,

and his cousin, who hated the fire  
and the heat that devoured his young friend,  
spent his long days lamenting near green

and cool waters, near flexible reeds  
and sad willows, near bank-blossomed fruits,  
searching, searching the ground for a mist

to dissolve in, until he was bent  
and just lifting his feet. So the swan  
that would always love water, loathe heat,

grew from this—from this grieving alone.

I could tell her the story is clear:

That the swan is a flowering grief.

That the swan is a terrible clamor.

Sorrow's face. Or the infinite stretch  
of the infinite loss of first pleasure.

One who knows underneath it is hollow.  
One whose wings cover serpents and hosts.  
*Will you float? Will you circle the pond?*  
*Will you enter the story yourself?*  
I could tell her beneath the dull waters  
where fins, purling muscles, quick gleams  
flash the dark, there's the body of dreams.  
*To be wise is to know many sorrows,*  
*is to know many holes where you stand,*  
*to unearth the dark cry under feathers.*  
*To be wise is to know many fires*  
*pouring over the flesh, the small soul*  
*on its quest. How the quest burns the whole.*  
*And the sun, the high sun, lets it happen,*  
*lets us rise in the rose-colored dawn . . .*  
but she flies from my shallow reflection.

GOD PUT THE NOOSE AROUND  
MY NECK

I stood trembling and shy  
on a chair of this world,  
stood there, poised in between  
my own life and loose space.  
“Love” the bent shadow of him  
adjusting, adjusting,  
with purposeful hands  
the contraption of threat.  
“Love” the tying of knots,  
fingers oiled in their skill,  
the sharp hinges of elbows  
framing dark work,  
the tense forearms like hills,  
and his breath in the distance,  
that sole, vivid warmth.

God the sad, God the ghost,  
all bravado and edges  
in the place between things.

I could tell he was nervous  
when he touched my life tenderly  
under the rope,  
when he kissed my soft throat  
after looping his threat.  
While I carefully stood  
on a chair of this world  
a hair’s breadth from loose space.  
You’d think God wouldn’t do this,  
that I’m somehow disgraced  
by such wicked imbalance,  
by the rope white as bones

snaking close to my face.  
But I saw through his act.  
I saw God's human face.  
It was bound up in mine  
and it needed my willingness.  
How far would I go  
to uncover my faith,  
to discover my life,  
the sheer weight of the self?  
It was good not to fall.  
And he tightened my throat  
with the length of his fear,  
to the shape of his want,  
and he pulled at my soul,  
tugged it this way and that—  
But he couldn't reach through  
the tight web of our difference.  
He knew this, and wept.

## THE GRASSHOPPER

It is a cunning thing:  
woven, it would appear, of grass blades  
and large as a hand, its hymn  
some vast, internal drum.  
Antennae waving at the newest sound  
it bristles when I approach  
as if the wall inside my house  
were all in the world  
to lean on. I imagine  
a soul is like this: driven  
to feel narrowed, more acute  
in a chosen exterior,  
some grumbling carapace.  
It waits, pristine as glass,  
a wordless, hardened angel  
with marble, all-seeing eyes.  
How do I catch the spirit  
then set it free intact?  
Now my jar snags  
a recalcitrant leg, the insect foams,  
flails curious dimensions,  
and, when "freed," limps off  
grotesque and frivolous  
against the grass. Maybe  
some liberation lies  
in being out of place, out of a home,  
movement itself should be a home  
where error has a space . . .  
but I'll fixate on the gleam.  
Am I its host?

Or does it, green and surly,  
unhinge the luminescent world,  
this papery self that leaps and leaps  
until a broken leg or wing  
(mauled by the usual downfall)  
looses it from the body  
and it can really spring.

## THE END OF SPRING

There is betrayal in such sudden change.  
We do not own it, this froth  
of heat drowning our efforts,  
making us frown at the day's complete,  
exhausting utterance. Minute  
after rayed minute rains down,  
on the sidewalks, in the corners of rooms,  
in our throats, and we are too tired  
to take the change apart. We give it a name.

*Summer*, we say. *The end of spring*.  
Flowers like lost grips,  
dried and slouched with disappointment.

Birth crawled into a crevice.  
Wasps flying through window cracks, withered, enraged.  
Last week, something raised its head  
and wild winds rolled  
from the Blue Ridge to the pine-covered hill  
behind my house

downing three pines over it. The broken trees  
we chopped and hauled away,  
polishing off the initial mess  
with carefulness. Every season  
shreds the deeply appreciated  
flares of the last.

Destruction. Creation.  
There is no good way to distinguish  
between the two. And our art isn't much different.

We like to pretend  
it stands clear, but it's always in flux.  
It moves. It falls.

It is. The weather of the world,  
the weather of the mind. It finds us.  
The way two goldfinches,  
the male with his black angled hood,  
the female brownish and earthly,  
return to my garden every afternoon.  
The way their species,  
elusive, yet too well-known,  
threaten to flicker my every poem  
with the usual cliché,  
though I have yet to catch their sublimity.  
I promise myself  
I won't let them in, but what can I do?  
I can't fight the refrain,  
what returns to the setting,  
returns to the poem,  
and does not grow tired of the vast, enduring  
background. I'd guess  
that is poetry:  
not flight, but things coming back  
where they're wanted, comfortable  
—haunts  
of detail—while the rest, the god or goddess,  
the uniform reign,  
lingers behind, never known  
in its entirety,  
heavy and gray, burnished and green,  
a tapestry so prevalent  
we hardly see it,  
the monstrous “yes” that does not change  
slipping over the hills into our hands,  
our feet, our eyes flooded with what  
could be peace  
in the star-flecked night.

IN THE ABSTRACT

Slowly, slowly, slowly,  
a red hawk circles the blue sky.  
“It is a meaning,”

I could say, or “It is matter,  
the *form*.” But that would be  
disingenuous.

How a word  
soars from us, leaving  
the mind open, the mouth empty.

Or, alternately, how it stabs at  
the small distinctions  
on land, conquering

deep untidiness  
shallowly. So my guess,  
placid and many-hued,

doubles the blue  
distance, which is almost all  
slate.

So it falls.  
If meaning were flight,  
would it be so perfectly honed,  
would it be such an instrument  
of departure,  
such a private chariot  
of feather and air?  
And what would that meaning  
find, the one

we can't touch, clear and sure  
of its path?  
How it would swath

through the blue shell  
of absence, not even a cry  
could reach, not even a cry  
on the highest of hills . . .  
Oh well. If I  
am not careful, the meaning's  
lost. Maybe  
it is what appears to be  
most vulnerable  
to loss: a word  
and its history, its freight,  
the wing that lifts  
our eyes to see beyond sight.

## AMBIVALENCE

It is hard to believe  
as alive as we are  
that on certain afternoons  
—say this one, with its gray streams of light  
into corners of rooms  
and its mild open air  
and its orthodox cries  
from lowest heaven—the soul can wander  
to and fro  
without knowing what to do,  
can be heavy with longing  
without longing for,  
and the feet can carry the body  
across floor after floor  
without going anywhere  
beyond their own plain action.  
Then there is no satisfaction.  
Then yearning, in fact,  
may be all we can find.  
At such times, the heart wants—  
To draw back? To lie still?  
We can't tell.  
The flesh holds out its hands,  
two lumps of desire,  
silver in the fallen light,  
tarnished with rifts, portents, years . . .  
They can bear no answer.

## THE CHANT

Why can't I sing myself awake  
when darkness falls, when darkness falls,  
or bring myself to brightly make  
a difference to my dragging soul  
since differences, as we've been told,  
are those that we ourselves create?

The crickets know a constant beat  
in pointed grass and shadowed hill  
as silence threatens to repeat,  
when darkness falls and fear unfolds.  
There they are, hunched and chanting still,  
an independent opposite

to all the rings of quiet black.  
But I can't simply rise and break  
this ring of silence in my heart  
or lift a hand to interrupt  
the evening that is closing down.  
I stay behind, I hesitate,

as leaden as a lying bell.  
The sky is like an empty shell  
and inside that, small instruments,  
beyond all expectation, leap,  
as darkness falls, as darkness falls.  
Their sound is sharp. They reconnect  
the quiet land to distant stars  
and lift, in tiny increments,  
some figure out of deepest thought.

When both our bodies wandered here  
and never thought to hesitate  
but did and meant, since they were near

those differences two souls can make,  
then evening held, and fear was old,  
and morning had a human shape.

## A FORWARD SPRING

Today the cold came back—  
a sudden estrangement.  
That first pale decision  
to reach as far as lushness can  
had just broken through:  
all the celebratory leaves  
explored by squirrels,  
the return of canopies  
instead of high naked trees,  
deer in new horns  
stepping over the folded  
carnage of winter storms,  
worms winding  
like thought through those layers  
where only a future had roots  
during periods of doubt,  
the mysterious wet dirt,  
and the sun's intelligence  
that separates clouds  
with rays of sheer will.  
I saw it so clearly,  
how the spring admitted winter  
but didn't retract.  
What they call the sublime  
doesn't look away  
but looks *at*, boldly examines  
the obscure impediments  
to what it wants; sees  
itself, sees what lies ahead  
of itself, and goes forth . . .

## RATTLESNAKE

What I remember is a cabin  
deep in the woods,  
the pure cold air my lungs drank,  
and that the earth  
was unusually hard, packed tightly  
under a thin layer of leaves.

We ate dinner, and I remember  
what a child would:  
mere flickers, bursts of laughter.  
Later, from a window  
I heard rustling, harsh words.  
You led me to the yard. A snake's head  
oozed onto the dirt.  
Its blank eyes glinted.  
One end and then the other  
of the body flexed and whipped  
in a twisting rhythm  
that dislodged leaves and stones.

When the writhing stopped  
you grabbed the snake  
and carried it to the kitchen.  
After curving a knife along  
its quiet belly, you pulled back the skin.  
I felt if I looked long enough  
I could read what was sprawled there,  
tangled and glistening.  
Then you tugged the heart  
from its nest of arteries and veins  
and handed it, still beating, to me.

It was firm and vivid red;  
cool, but the pulse sent heat  
into my palm. I walked outside  
to watch the heart pump  
in the eerie sheen of moonlight.

And that's what I have left:  
the warm, dull throbbing of a heart  
held carefully on my open hand  
before I let it fall.

IN THE VALLEY

Let us walk in the valley.  
Let us walk with our hands  
opened wide in the valley.

Let us gaze at the desert.  
Let us not turn to flame  
at the eye of the desert.

Let us pass the green mountains  
and answer the bones  
as they gasp with the wind

*Are you last? Are you lone?*  
Let us hear our own name,  
let us find a stone warmed  
by the sun in our valley.

AFTER A LINE OF PLATO

I

In the city that shall be perfect,  
in the city of intelligence  
where thinking reigns  
and desire is at rest  
and what happens happens  
because the self wills it  
to be so, you are reading.  
I am almost asleep.  
The sun slants  
on your belly, over your limbs.  
I am watching it find circumstance.  
I am wondering how fast, how fast,  
this abstract energy goes.  
Outside, children's shrieks  
mix with birdsong and men's saws  
and feet back and forth. I am trying  
to rise in this cavern of sound  
as if with a terrible weight.  
The sun swings around  
our flesh, armed and glorious,  
a procession of ages,  
a procession of myth.  
If it is true that the clichés follow us  
because they have something to say  
then this crow on a giant oak tree  
makes a very important point.  
It croaks a series of harsh notes:  
*One, two, three.*  
About our mortality, maybe.  
*One, two, three.*

Or the force of the mind  
when it lands on the tree of the body  
and believes it owns everything.

*One, two, three.*

When Satan entered the garden,  
he chose a bird

as his initial enchantment, his primary matter,  
its black feathers flecked  
with iridescence,

all the colors of the garden  
playing over its sheen.

He found the highest tree

to peruse his newfound paradise from  
and stayed there a very long time  
pondering what to begin.

It must have been spring.

The fruits of his provocation  
hanging down. The blunt sounds

of animals in the shadows,  
fleshly things. A man and a woman  
asleep, her dreaming

of difference.

This is the place  
where what I am

and what I would like to be  
opens its wings . . .

Today is Saturday. The tuliptrees'

pale yellow-greens  
bloom unfinished, the fringed palms  
of the maple unravel,

tiny, red-veined. Pater says  
"the seemingly new is old also"  
and "mere matter alone

is nothing.” Our crow doesn’t know this  
as he sends out his song  
to a distance that constantly  
takes it. He’s the detail  
unable to see  
past its beak. But the devil in us  
knows how surely we reside  
at the periphery, how foolish  
is all speech.

## II

And this is what the world is.  
Primarily music. Not meaning  
but action and form. Not meaning.  
In the city of perpetual motion,  
in the city that *will* be enough,  
the matter itself  
has arrived.  
It lands in the midst of our innocence.  
It lands with its own kind of innocence,  
a hard fact beneath it,  
the soft air around.  
Both the body of stillness  
and the body of flight,  
poised on a branch  
no soul could reach,  
with the voice that is not prettiest,  
it will sing,  
all the colors of the garden  
playing over its wings,  
while the adequate, more than adequate  
promise hangs—



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## THE MAY SWENSON POETRY AWARD

THE MAY SWENSON POETRY AWARD WAS NAMED FOR MAY SWENSON, AND honors her as one of America's most provocative, insouciant, and vital poets. During her long career, May published eleven volumes of poems, and she was loved and praised by writers from virtually every major school of poetry. She left a legacy of nearly fifty years of writing when she died in 1989.

May Swenson lived most of her adult life in New York City, the center of poetry writing and publishing in her day. But she is buried in Logan, Utah, her birthplace and hometown.

## Praise for *The Hammered Dulcimer*

Lisa Williams's poems often start out in song and end in epistemology, but they frequently break out into a kind of humming in the course of walking their self-generated routes. They manifest a fine ear not only for the rhythms of verse in English, but for those of the argument that makes them. . . .

They extend a line of powerfully and actively contemplative poetry that marks some of the finest American verse of the twentieth century.

. . . It is most appropriate that Lisa Williams's work receive an award in the name of that profoundly original poet, May Swenson, for this is not only a more than promising first book, but introduces an original way of looking at the world — and of looking at that looking itself. It is a pleasure to greet it.

—from the Foreword by John Hollander



Winner of the May Swenson Award, Lisa Williams has also received an Academy of American Poets' Prize, a Tennessee Williams Scholarship to the Sewanee Writer's Conference, and other awards. Her work has been published widely in literary journals.

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