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Hammered Dulcimer

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

