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Hammered Dulcimer

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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.