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## Hammered Dulcimer

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## 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.