

# Lisa Williams

## Laurel

(after Bernini's "Apollo and *Daphne*")

The man leaped lightly through the fields,  
an arm's length from my heels. I felt my feet  
burning, lifting bits of wrenched grass—chunks  
of dirt, pebbles, root clumps—as I lunged past  
where I had been, each former green harbor  
abandoned. Air rasped in my ears,  
whirred through the bristling foliage  
that crowded my path, sent out spikes  
and appendages. Twigs and leaf-edges  
scraped me, drew stuttering lines on my skin.  
Through the blurred, varying canopy  
I glimpsed a sky riven to pieces, slivers  
of its blue patina like a broken vase,  
the thing I'd looked up to, all its shapes  
wasted; soft, blowing forms—horns and sheep  
and goats, billows of noble cloth, bridal veils  
—marred by the dimming fringe  
overhead. Shadows and light climbed  
my skin as if witted, racing over  
flesh to some end—but what was it—  
complete blinding white, like a temple?  
Darkness of Proserpine's throne?  
Little bits of both flecked my path: broken  
poses, scattered fundamentals.

Each pound of my heels struck like needles.  
Each foot dribbled blood

but I kept pushing, through one scrim  
of branches to another, arriving

somewhere that was only on the way  
to more evasion. I ran towards *me* from his

outstretching hands, a me that bloomed  
in the distance, as if my self were the goal

all along. I heard him call:  
*Apollo*. He pounded and glowed

behind me, his name flung through the narrow  
scope of our flights, the air filled

with leafy ligatures and long, strangling vines.  
*I follow*. He drove me from groves

calling "sister", "sister," "beloved"  
as he flattened the fields. I looked behind me

to see the gold-spattered skin  
of a God, smell the fragrance of honey

—too rich, cloying, reminding me of bees,  
a swarm I witnessed when I was a girl:

all momentum and hum  
and restless needling: a thunderous colony

of bodies: cacophonous wings.  
I had been sitting on a log, had moved away

and then seen them: exactly in the place  
my body had been a few seconds before

Lisa Williams

as if to inhabit the air still rich  
with my breath—as if my previous presence

formed a portal, a sudden arch  
for arrival. It was like this with Apollo:

each place I'd been was opening to him  
even as my steps fled, the air emptied of me

ripe for his existence. Escape  
belonged to me, and he wanted that too.

*Apollo*, the fetid smell:  
the pound and call: his want. I hoped

the landscape would bury me,  
that I could slip into the background,

as if into relief, the flat place  
around those outstanding ones, icons raised

on white portals. *Father, father, protect me . . .*  
Then the bark gnarled up between our limbs.

Then the hair he craved coiled to leaves.  
He supposed me a surface, like a river

he could embark on, a fleet of waves,  
silvery and involving . . . reveries

I hindered or interrupted, snapping fresh  
tendrils mid-stretch. Now we are caught

like two stones. I wrench into bark,  
my nerves numbed. An umber rush

floods my skull, and my mind  
dulls and hardens, entrenched

with gold sap. Clenched, but freed.  
Dropped questions, dropped fluidities—

The clefts in my hands splay to leaves: white  
roots from my toes pierce cold ground.

No man will pry loose this body.  
No god will wrack what is mine.

## ***Midas' Pause***

I tried to ornament my life  
with gold unfoldings, luteous curls

like antique horns and old illumined scrolls,  
mosaics in an emperor's bath, or temple

hearths where virgins guarded fires,  
those pyres Aeneas piled high for the dead.

I wanted brilliance spooling from my fingers  
as brown sprigs burst to floral Springs,

to leave gilt in the dust each time I turned  
away, and glister venerable trails

like the sheen of an exotic snail  
streaming across the underworld,

fine threads of my bestowal. The gods  
would not be more admired than I

with each branch of my royalty,  
whatever I touch exploding—now—with value

new to itself, no longer just itself,  
poor fingertips' bequeathal! Could I guess

embellishing the plain, this precious vice,  
would leave me starved for what is ordinary,

would leave *us* ruined, whoever shared  
a meal with me, whomever I might hand

a thing, or lay a palm on, kindly, warmly?  
I can make a surface glitter. But I can't

drink or eat. No ladle of river water,  
no crumb of bread or ripening autumn fig

brushes my lips before it strikes like lead,  
each bruising gulp a new coin in the void

of my stomach, a hoard of grandeur  
harder to bear each hour, undigested

and contrary to flesh. I languish  
for the lack of what seems common: a tomato,

a simple root from a clump of musky soil,  
my wife's familiar breath. What worth is worth

if it closes me from life? I lower myself  
to the floor and watch the awful beauty

creep in circles ranging farther out  
from where I sit, making the sound

of cracks and splits as it transfigures tiles  
like a fleet of molten serpents lashing

from my still-lumpish flesh along  
the floor into the blooming garden

where my wife bends now, clipping vines . . .  
I see her gesture slowly as she sees

—too late—the alteration climb  
from soil to overtake her body's standstill,

a metamorphosis that kills  
as adders' poison does. She can't escape

without ripping her leg from her own ankle,  
and so must freeze there, horrified,

as it crawls to fossilize her flesh,  
her sex, her mother's milk

Lisa Williams

and then—slowly, at last—entrap  
the small pulse of her throat, stopping her breath,

her mind that still beats tinnily in its cage  
till all thought's wings are smothered ...

But I move too fast, imagining that which  
hasn't happened. What does what weighs

in the hand and gleams before my sight  
turn into a tyrant? How I want

to take one soiled and gardening hand  
of hers from the dirt and kiss it! She absorbs

what light falls on her body, doesn't glow  
as cold and as unfeeling as my opus.

## *Death and Transfiguration of a Star*

Ambitious beam,  
what's physical in your case "strains  
all concepts of the conditions  
of matter." Trillions of times  
strict as steel, thousands the pull

of the earth's magnetic field,  
spinning and spinning  
on mercurial impulse  
as if in a race to defeat  
only your past increase, earlier

your inner center became your cloak  
in a brash refashioning,  
your deepest matter worn now on the sleeve,  
old metals polished,  
a world of sword blades clashed

a millisecond. What's physical  
in you swells beyond mere image. Numbers pale.  
Surface "smooth as a billiard ball"  
won't cut it. Pre-intellectual,  
dependent on the mind

to be imagined but not to exist,  
after the ultimate solipsist-  
ic meltdown--all guns in the arsenal  
for despair, all hooves in the stable  
of soldering force,

all shards of the heavenly mirror  
held in your fists--you stabilize  
instead of disappear,  
your silver arms stretch light light years  
ahead of dying.

Some hole awaits  
as blackness must



Lisa Williams

the most boggling volts. You will be  
zero volume, endless density,  
when words don't leave a trace.

## **Jellyfish**

Movement means closure,  
a thrust from where you are,  
that gelid other plane,

your bell-like head  
with wordless aperture  
emptying, emptying,

the pleats of your innards,  
a shallow accordion.  
Your tendrils trail neon

lit cities of cells  
--you, pellucid ferry,  
invisibly carried

spun dome like the ghost  
of some merry-go-round.  
And we who don't float

with such unconscious ease  
think it terror to rise  
from our notions of *land*,

*rock*, and *ownership*, can't  
ride a bottomless plain,  
colored trust in our sails,

in the lax, placid matter  
that holds, not from falls  
(for you too fill your head

so your gossamer motors  
move onward) but holds  
your shape firm. Even you,

Lisa Williams

if you never once moved,  
if you didn't take in  
the first place where you are,

fold around that cold present  
then push out, with liquid  
momentum (like knowledge)

from flushed, chambered cells,  
would ascend nowhere new.  
In the planktonous dark,

a touch is the world,  
the devouring of touch  
motion's guidance. Your emptied

bell head tolls the thrust,  
the sole luminous effort—clear  
life thinking's lost!

***Woman in Front of Firelight***  
***after a painting by Franco Mondini-Ruiz***

This was a different light, but still familiar.  
She felt illumined and she felt afraid  
—serpents of color lashing through degrees

of ambience, heat. She knew their streams would fade  
to ash, that their beauty would decompose,  
like a passion that blazed into display

then dwindled, and there was a little sadness  
to this hard truth: she lived in a world  
where such lush burnishings arrayed

only a moment before they smouldered.  
But now, enfolded in a pause  
of orange flamboyance, even though its cause

was material, finite (unlike feeling),  
she felt her life drawn through her eyes  
toward some liquid body, rimmed in wings

beating and beating, that would not lower her  
down to time. There were many things  
outside this room she should remember,

that she should be turning in her mind  
for these kindled minutes, golden, rare . . .  
but thoughts left as she watched the fire.

Lisa Williams

## ***At the Church of Santa Prassede***

In the Chapel of the Garden of Paradise  
(Rome)

Heaven must be dull compared to this:  
panes and flecks of color

curving over us, bright celebrants.  
Every surface covered.

Every surface jewelled.  
Coral and jade. Turquoise, topaz, agate.

More succinct than paint,  
these glassed, transcending hues.

From the smallest scale they widen  
into landscapes more intense

than we imagined, obliterating  
even the idea of sin, and creating

a realm that we can look to from our realm.  
Who cares if there is no horizon, no sun,

no home like this dreamed mosaic  
except in memory?

Who cares about the doorway  
(which must be entered) to a dimmer world?

—Or that there is nothing  
of our language rendered clearly,

when there is this vision made entirely  
of particles assembled,

which didn't *arrive*?  
See how the eye moves

from cut, shimmering square  
to cut, shimmering square,

each increment's aspect placed  
(like the flecks of an insect's scale)

by hands that have disappeared?  
Can it matter that those hands were human?

## **Restoration**

Decline is this blue dusk  
sharp around the steeple  
and a bell tower's edge,

in which street lamps glow orange  
and shoes clatter on cobblestones.  
A person or two stops

to speak of what they know  
while hurrying past, and I listen  
to their words pry the weight of darkness.

Wholly anonymous,  
I watch light sink into stones.  
I watch alleys, baroque facades,

shop fronts and fountains all slide  
toward decay, and I grip them with sight  
--this medieval church, for example,

its chiseled, elaborate face.  
Inside, I find shadows draped  
in chapels and on marble tombs

but I wander until the lines  
of the paintings and sculptures fade  
so much I see the way out

alone. There's a little more light  
outdoors, and I think of the church  
left behind overspread with shadow

as I and the others leave,  
of its hard and silent altar.  
We restore the things we need

in mind; restore and preserve  
with vision, or with fresh thought,  
in passing only, the icons

established, not quite our own,  
thus witnessed, and slightly altered,  
as we walk through the holy city

(just as we move through a poem),  
choosing what to let dim, what grace  
with a transient inner light.

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**Lisa Williams** has poems forthcoming in *Measure* (formerly *The Formalist*), *Quadrant* (Australia), *Image*, *Raritan*, *The Southern Review*, and *Salmagundi*, and an essay forthcoming in *The Hollins Critic*. Her book of poems, *The Hammered Dulcimer*, was published in 1998. In 2004 she was awarded the Rome Prize by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Originally from Nashville, Tennessee, she is currently assistant professor of English at Centre College in Danville, KY.