

## Advance Praise

“In John Sibley Williams’s “amalgam of real /and fabled light” one is able to believe again in the lyric poem as beautiful—if difficult—proof of private space. As with families, histories, selves, Sibley writes: “we like to believe / what we make will save us.” *Disinheritance* contends intimately with loss, to be sure – but it also proposes the poem as a way to remember, to persist, to be oneself, to believe. And to persist when belief may not be possible within the bounds of the shores the seas impose upon us.”

—Joan Naviyuk Kane

“There is eternal longing in these poems of John Sibley Williams. A yearning for what cannot be understood. A song for what simply is. A distance beyond human measurement. The dead and alive dancing, hurting, and praying at the mouth of what must be the beginning of time. A series of profound losses giving birth to words no different from medicine.”

—Zubair Ahmed

“There is a hunger in these poems, one of an empty handed wise man who wants to sing. And sing he does. Here in *an amalgam of real / and fabled light*, stones ask questions of rivers, as the poet *reaches toward the temporary holiness of knowing*. These are mostly his words because how else can one speak of what the poem offers, but through the poem. Let these poems sing to you too. Let them hold you in that *raw place of hope*, let them be *ships mooring us to the wild / bottomless sea*.”

—Daniela Elza

“In John Sibley Williams’ moving, somber collection, the power of elegy, reverie, and threnody transcends the disinheritance caused by separation. These compellingly atemporal poems form the locus wherein generations of a family can gather. Here, Williams’ lyric proto-language—elemental, archetypal, primordial—subsumes barriers of time and space. His poems create their own inheritance.”

—Paulann Petersen, Oregon Poet Laureate Emerita

# Disinheritance

John Sibley Williams



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John Sibley Willams



Apprentice House  
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Baltimore, Maryland

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Loyola University Maryland

4501 N. Charles Street

Baltimore, MD 21210

410.617.5265 • 410.617.2198 (fax)

[www.ApprenticeHouse.com](http://www.ApprenticeHouse.com)

[info@ApprenticeHouse.com](mailto:info@ApprenticeHouse.com)

*For my mother, always*

The author extends his heartfelt gratitude to the following journals and anthologies for previously publishing poems, some in different versions, in *Disinheritance*:

*Analekta Anthology (Boho Books)* – In Apology, Salmon Run, and  
Calligraphy

*The Blue Hour Magazine* – Ceremony, Fertility, and Miscarriage

*Bodega* – A Dead Boy Fashions the Grand Canyon from His Body

*Booth* – In the Kingdom of Moths

*Brittle Star* – A Dead Boy During the Dry Season and A Dead Boy

Distinguishes Proximal from

Distal

*Bryant Literary Review* – Sanctuary

*Chiron Review* – November Country

*Cirque* – I Sit My Grandfather by the Mouth of the Columbia River

*Cricket Online Review* – A Room for Listening

*Event Magazine* – Away from Stillness and Penance

*Freshwater* – Say Bang

*Grey Sparrow Journal* – The Cultural Narrative of Clouds and To

Name Butterfly

*Handsome* – Forth and Back

*Lake Effect* – Alight

*Life and Legends* – Frontiers

*Literati Quarterly* – Eulogy

*Lunch Ticket* – Denouement

*Nebo* – A Dead Boy Fishes with His Dead Grandfather, A Dead Boy

Learns Metaphor, and A

Dead Boy Speaks to His Parents

*Osiris* – Truce, House on Fire, A Dead Boy Visits the Grotto, and A

Dead Boy Counts

*pacificREVIEW* – Grief is a Primitive Art

*Penumbra* – Mother's Day and Lullaby for the Damned

*Prelude* – Echo Chamber

*PRISM International* – A Dead Boy Martyrs His Mother

*Radar* – Teething and Things Start at Their Names

*Red Paint Hill* – Hemophilia

*The Scrambler* – Paean and Preparations Have Been Made

*Sequestrum* – Oppenheimer, Pompeii, and Optimism

*Skidrow Penthouse* – Procession and Postpartum

*SLAB* – This Place of Scraps

*Third Coast* – Bone River (all parts)

*Willow Review* – I Go to the Ruined Place

*Xanadu* – For My Mother, in Parting

“Hemophilia” was a finalist for the *Hawai’i Review’s* Ian MacMillan Award.

“Bone River” was a finalist for the *Third Coast* Poetry Prize.

“Grief is a Primitive Art” won 2<sup>nd</sup> place in Oregon Poetry Association’s 2015 Contest.

“Denouement” was an honorable mention in Oregon Poetry Association’s 2015 Contest.



Look: no one ever promised for sure  
that we would sing. We have decided  
to moan. In a strange dance that  
we don't understand till we do it, we  
have to carry on.

William Stafford  
from "An Introduction to Some Poems"



I.



## Bone River (i)

Our child experiments with her  
limbs, displacing air and  
waiting for the vacancy to fill.

Such a raw gesture—  
raw and enigmatic remorse.

*What is it here I have done  
and am waiting for?*

For what it's worth, love,  
a stone asks the same  
question of the river.

*Have I broken you yet?*

# Truce

A panic of finches rises and tonight  
the late salmon moon is filled

with rivers and old shadows. Reflected,  
iridescing, an amalgam of real

and fabled light. I rub grains of wood and cloud  
between my hands and stretch from the grass

into a grandmotherly story of angels,  
their necessary demons, and how little

it takes for the one to climb or descend into  
the other. This is what she told me before

she climbed or descended. The distance from us was  
the same. This is how she explained where I'd gone

and am going.

My hands don't remember much anymore  
of where the birds have flown. There are felled trees

in the sky. The moon's face drifts across the river.

And I miss the hard geometries of coffins.

# Salmon Run

The river comes bloody to our shore and we are thinking  
less of causes than how to abstain from drinking.  
Hands form a perfect cup, our mouths oval into

a perfect thirst. It is hard

but a good thing to say *no* sometimes  
to these choring fish and violent incisions of sawgrass.  
It is good, this struggle. The heavens  
and the earth can only keep us

inside so long. Shores erode and all  
of a sudden we are chin-deep and vanishing  
upstream in bundled schools toward whatever it was our  
great-grandfathers were,

toward the temporary holiness of knowing  
all my mistakes have been made before.

River, angry

old river, I understand your need to run  
swiftly from the source. I too don't look back  
at the mountains, so distant, dawn-red,

where I am headed to spawn.

# November Country

My grandfather digs a double plot  
with his bare hands in case winter  
can be shared  
though he knows grandmother will outlive  
her heart's thaw by a decade.  
I could give him a shovel. Instead

I ball the half-frozen river's slack  
numb around my fist, tighten  
into ice. I will try to be less  
hard next time.  
Here in the gray  
and two-dimensional house  
we know the answer to rain.

A perforated black  
arrow of birds moves  
southward, away. Shriill reports  
from every side and from the sky  
the trajectory of abandonment.

Our surfaces are like the river.  
Our circles have learned  
to grow edges and crack.  
Even the birds  
we compare ourselves to

have left us.

# Syncopation

Once we believed the animal  
heart, ceremonially extracted from flesh

and swallowed, free of our own  
distortions, would drive us,

healed,  
toward eternity.

\*

How we got here, together,  
is clear enough.

A white doe tracked across  
whitest winter.

Indents in earth deep  
as the body can manage

and behind them our own  
unerasable prints to follow home.

I eat the landscape with the whole  
of my eyes. White doe, whitest field,

shared, empty, the nourishment I expect  
from taking in her heart.

However much I eat,  
there is not enough *forever*

woven into her body  
to heal me.

\*

Language breaks down  
like this: *you*

must in some way suggest the *I*.  
The world must break

inward. My heart  
must be there, in yours,

or nothing.  
I have nothing but this need.

Yours is the doe's heart I must eat  
to remember why I'm here.

# Grief is a Primitive Art

No one taught me  
how to draw this bedroom—

in undefined charcoal,  
with the immediacy of crayon,  
erasable pencil,  
permanent ink,  
stone upon stone  
upon wall?

Should the light source  
be celestial  
or inherent to our hands?  
Either way  
it seems angled  
away from your face.

For background, to include  
our broken reflections  
or an empty mirror?  
And how long  
can the flowers  
I brought you  
retain their color?  
Can you even see them?

Arbitrarily I've decided

to depict the sheets  
as a cancer,  
your body a shadow,  
our tears an empty vase,

and faith  
has forever been rendered  
a shallow cup  
inches from our lips.

# Ceremony

Though it is deep  
unreturnable winter,  
I am told to open  
all the windows  
in this room of too many  
exits.

Snowflakes beat themselves senseless  
against your moon-blached face  
and in melting smother  
the ritual candles  
we've left burning all day,  
all night, and will reuse  
soon enough.

Something like prayer  
but without the certainty  
flutters aimlessly between us  
with no place to land.

Our breath is the air  
and the air is opaque.

There is a fever-pitched giving  
and an inevitable taking.

Forbidden, the cold light  
we're left with  
hurts the stars  
and the stars aren't  
in your hair  
anymore.

Father writes "open"  
on your forehead in ash  
while I trace "tomorrow"  
on the white sheet  
of your eyes  
going still.

# A Dead Boy Speaks to His Parents

Hush now;

you don't have to be                      anymore.

Whatever script you'd written for the stars to follow, they've missed  
their marks,  
gone true right                      instead of stage right.

Nightly, you whisper:  
*ever since*                      *perhaps because*                      *or even before —*

but you don't have to thread cause through effect

or rummage through whatever beginnings you've captured on film to  
discover a fixed point of departure.

The zoetrope continues to spin                      without image.

Mom and Dad;

you don't have to be                      contained anymore

between the lines I never had time to write  
on the stars                      that don't listen anyway.