Water Picture by May Swenson

The Water Picture is a description of the world as it appears reflected from a pond in a park. Through vocabulary and imagery, Swenson delves into a skewed world where normal, everyday objects have become twisted, bent and turned upside-down in an attempt to show the reader a world from a different set of eyes. While some may adhere that the tone is playful and wondrous, the poem can be construed as dark and almost twisted, the author showing us that not everything is, as it appears to be when seen from certain vantage points. Swenson uses simile to describe a flag reflected in the pond “like a fishhook down there in the sky” (Water Picture).

The aforementioned simile is telling in not only it’s vocabulary, but imagery. The poet uses the term “fishhook”, an object jagged and sharp, meant to lodge itself into a fish’s mouth, fish that might live in ponds, such as the one she is looking at. She is referring to the way a flag wags in the reflective surface of the pond, and she mentions that it is “down there in the sky” (Water Picture), down being the key word here. For, the flag in all reality is down in the pond as far as the eye can tell. Same as the clouds mentioned prior to the flag, they are mentioned as below, this gives indication to seeing the world as different, more than just playful; there is a larger message within these words.

The people and animals mentioned in this poem are seen as upside-down or in the case of birds, belly up. While this may indeed be how they appear in reflection, the poet does not defer from her point of view of objects in the pond, instead seeing the whole world in a distorted and crooked way, causing the familiar to become unfamiliar. By not deferring to how the objects
would appear naturally, that is, not reflected, the reader is forced into seeing the world through this distorted view. This conveys a sense of unease and causes the reader to wonder what is the poet really saying, and I think that is people, and the world in general, are different depending on where and how you view them.

Looking at the choice of vocabulary, this unease is affirmed. May Swenson refers to the stone bridge as an eye with its bottom eyelid in the water, making the bridge an eye that sees everything fuzzy and inaccurate from the natural state of being. The poet describes the blooms on trees as roots and a swan as having two necks, appearing to kiss itself; and children seem to be suspended in the air. The poet mentions the dogs barking on their backs as they go by, the reason for them barking is neither stated nor clear. A baby is feeding the ducks while holding a pink balloon, which in the pond, looks like a buoy. The barking creates a feeling of chaos while the buoy seems to hold that chaos together, keeping it all wrapped up in the pond. The swan hissing, yet at the same time kissing itself is also chaotic, for what would be the reason for it hissing?

This is all the direct opposite of reality and it is the never wavered from throughout the poem. The poem is written as a paradox to the natural world, yet staring into the pond, this is how everything appears. While it would be easy to dismiss any real meaning and declare the poet was just describing the natural world, as it appears mirrored, and that such things fascinate poet is a futile attempt at understanding the true meaning behind this piece. After it’s mentioned that the swan kisses herself, the poet disrupts the whole scene by saying “…the water-windows splinter, tree-lims tangle, the bridge folds like a fan.” (Water Picture). The reader is left to wonder what about the scene was troubled and so disruptive? This further adds to the confusion and chaos the poet is attempting to create and makes a close reader more uncomfortable.
The poem actually reminds me of Alice In Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, where up is down and black is white and nothing is as it should be. Unlike Alice In Wonderland though, this is rooted in reality. The opening line from the poem reads as followed: “In the pond in the park all things are doubled:” (Water Picture). This sets up the idea that is never mentioned, that there are two of everything in the scene being painted by the poet. While we know it to be the reflection in the pond, the outside world, the world outside of the pond is not hinted at again. That idea of doubles along with the fantastic vocabulary give the “Water Picture” a haunting beauty that may escape a reader who doesn’t look into the pond with the poet, but just skims the surface.