

JOANNA C. VALENTE & LUCAS HUNT

LEDA & THE SWAN

i.

a whirling light pirouettes like Leda's
swan dancing in rosebud shimmer—

pine needles coalescing within the crashes
of waves rolling like sweet bread

from the depths of a shark's mouth
foaming ripples carrying carcasses of hearts

before love was quantifiable & had nutrition
facts attached like maraschino cherries in a Shirley

Temple, swirling around the dreams of a girl who
grew up near the black

soot of a railroad—the musk still
in her breath even after she moves

to Brooklyn & breathes sun into the mouths
of men—renamed herself X, Witch, Other, You;

who meets a light in the shape of a man,
bones roving gelatinous like a god without purpose—

born without death so instead filled with madness, dripping
golden threads into her, then back out

to the black gloss of ghosts wedged between
stars drifting in the space beneath the universe

ii.

Voices circling like spring operas echo in shadow
around a table of comets & hail storms, impenetrable

& the voices quiet then rise like the birth of the sea
& there is blood & there is a darkness creeping out of

a slanted light yellowish like sickness
congealing magnetic, uncontainable & the voices begin

to wail, crunching bones beating in song—then murmur as a mother
to child: the blood is gone.

There is silence, an absent ringing
of organs in a cathedral, a childless womb, a bird fluttering

around the death of stars as dust falls
to earth in verse: a man & woman.

iii.

Beginning is hard work, harder than the madness
of gods, eternal summer, a pang builds within their bellies

& spreads, buzzards led astray
hummingbirds gouging milk & honey

into eyes so the eyes can see, pipes into Eden.

In sevens, women grow out of the ocean & men

crawl out of swamp, from darkness they come
& to darkness men will return

to the first loneliness, the first

female orgasm, the first word—

bodies twilighting.

iv.

Tucked under wing, life felt appropriate
beak to neck & handcuffed to spine

bent praying to god, an animal release
this higher nature (who came from shit

& would sail East Hampton ponds)
for leisure, disrupting innocence

& took gold away, took pain away, surrendered
unto ocean & shell, swallowed all the muck

(derived from it anyway let it sink in deeper).
Swan cared not for bread, but loaves of death

to starve upon, liked 'em stale, from factories
where food had chemical names.

Sickness being too much, not enough was
not so sleekly wrapped around her neck

together they guessed truckstop, tornado & violin
to be subliminal places, guttural cosmos

where passions got shot, windows light
could not see, wild bulls stampede in fields

& struggle, sometimes a bad cinema companion,
bore her early breathlessness for homicide,

made sure both parents were dead (so wrong)
and smashed on mushrooms escaped (so good).

vi. O come let us abhor them, Sunday spirits
gone fishin' other days, and congregate

only to laugh at the American Legion, a place
for country music, turn *that* music off

but welcome, the boy from across the street
drank cheap Canadian whiskey here

and once brought Africa from Iowa City
to heap love on Janis Joplin haters,

suppose religion had no name, suppose
from church to extra terrestrial

spaceship, a snake up the leg would be
the light, broken flute, angry babysitter,

waiting and waiting for mother's Ford Grenada
to exit a gravel contrail of dust.

vii.

Leda learned to pray before she could form
full sentences, before her name rolled off

the tongues of boys learning to make love like wrecked tulips
listening to flame frost between thrusts /

every winter, Leda dreams of her body
dying between cars, within ocean waves, inside bath tubs
with a giant tub of ice cream

& Clorox whispering the phrase: I had a lover once
who's not afraid to die but I am ;;;

I promised someone whose name I don't remember
that I would never google the word 'failure' or fall in love

through the internet or with the internet (I can't
remember which is true) except that I promised

someone who isn't a body in this room where
my body is still beating

not to break into blank ;;;

no one jumps off cliffs anymore & the sun
is dying like all of us.

viii.

It is impossible not to love how clothing falls off
women like parachutes

falling with the intensity of the strongest emotion
you've ever felt

;;;

once we fell asleep on the same planet
& Swan waited behind Elk's barn with a chainsaw & matches

watching distant horses morph into windows
while spiders build webs the perfect shape for a woman's ankle

& the gods ask each other what they would build
with porcelain & some answer: breath, clocks, movement

& Swan answers: ghosts
who drink beer & believe Pluto is a planet because they work

nights underwater using one kidney
who isn't afraid of typos in the dark & fucks with eyes closed

whose life is as boring as autocorrect.

viii.

When Leda met Swan, she discovered the kind of fucking
where stars cease to be, where wind falls flat

like tires down dirt roads she's never been before
& won't drive until after she leaves avenues connected

by metal & thunder & women's thighs rubbing against turnstiles
bones carving hips like first woman ;;;

it took Leda a building like Grand Central to make her feel empty
to make her stop swallowing knives & matches & chlorine

after S touched her, told her he loved her in a room
with no lights, his skinny body on top

of her body soft like dandelions erasing daintily
with each thrust & years later, she doesn't remember

a day in New York when she's not tired, when she's not
still the kind of woman who would be burned

at the stake

for being only a theory of a girl ;;;

the gods are drunk so often that Swan doesn't know
what time it is & his blood is frozen

in time within the brains of men who babble strewn flowers
come in the kitchen with an empty cup only to say

you are not enough, your beauty is not
beautiful anymore, we cannot have sex

like we used to, it is no longer spring
& the moon no longer glows like a mating swan

but more like an idiot who left his fly open
in front of his seven-year-old daughter

eating maggots out of a crocodile's throat ;;;

every March, Leda opens a jar of
mayonnaise in the sun, observes how the earth smells

like the end of death, the beginning of something
& thanks the man who drove her to get the pill

to end all beauty.