**Leda and the Swan**

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,

He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push

The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

And how can body, laid in that white rush,

But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,

Did she put on his knowledge with his power

Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

—W. B. Yeats

**Critics and Connoisseurs**

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious

fastidiousness. Certain Ming

products, imperial floor coverings of coach-

wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I have seen something

that I like better—a

mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted animal stand up,

similar determination to make a pup

eat his meat from the plate.

I remember a swan under the willows in Oxford,

with flamingo-colored, maple-

leaflike feet. It reconnoitered like a battle-

ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were

ingredients in its

disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was

not proof against its

proclivity to more fully appraise such bits

of food as the stream

bore counter to it; it made away with what I gave it

to eat. I have seen this swan and

I have seen you; I have seen ambition without

understanding in a variety of forms. Happening to stand

by an ant-hill, I have

seen a fastidious ant carrying a stick north, south,

east, west, till it turned on

itself, struck out from the flower bed into the lawn,

and returned to the point

from which it had started. Then abandoning the stick as

useless and overtaxing its

jaws with a particle of whitewash—pill-like but

heavy—it again went through the same course of procedure.

What is

there in being able

to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude of self-defense;

in proving that one has had the experience

of carrying a stick?

—Marianne Moore

**Swan**

Far-off

at the core of space

at the quick

of time

beats

and goes still

the great swan upon the waters of all endings

the swan within vast chaos, within the electron.

For us

no longer he swims calmly

nor clacks across the forces furrowing a great gay trail

of happy energy,

nor is he nesting passive upon the atoms,

nor flying north desolative icewards

to the sleep of ice,

nor feeding in the marshes,

nor honking horn-like into the twilight.

But he stoops, now

in the dark

upon us;

he is treading our women

and we men are put out

as the vast white bird

furrows our featherless women

with unknown shocks

and stamps his black marsh-feet on their white and marshy flesh.

—D. H. Lawrence

**The Black Swan**

Black on flat water past the jonquil lawns

Riding, the black swan draws

A private chaos warbling in its wake,

Assuming, like a fourth dimension, splendour

That calls the child with white ideas of swans

Nearer to that green lake

Where every paradox means wonder.

Although the black neck arches not unlike

A question mark on the lake,

The swan outlaws all possible questioning:

A thing in itself, equivocal, foreknown.

Like pain, or women singing as we wake;

And the swan song it sings

Is the huge silence of the swan.

Illusion: the black swan knows how to break

Through expectation, beak

Aimed now at its own breast, now at its image,

And move across our lives, if the lake is life,

And by the gentlest turning of its neck

Transform, in time, time’s damage;

To less than a black plume, time’s grief.

Enchanter: the black swan has learned to enter

Sorrow’s lost secret centre

Where, like a May fête, separate tragedies

Are wound in ribbons round the pole to share

A hollowness, a marrow of pure winter

That does not change but is

Always brilliant ice and air.

Always the black swan moves on the lake. Always

The moment comes to gaze

As the tall emblem pivots and rides out

To the opposite side, always. The blond child on

The bank, hands full of difficult marvels, stays

Now in bliss, now in doubt.

His lips move: I love the black swan.

—James Merrill

**Three Sentences for a Dead Swan**

1

There they are now,

The wings,

And I heard them beginning to starve

Between two cold white shadows,

But I dreamed they would rise

Together,

My black Ohioan swan.

2

Now one after another I let the black scales fall

From the beautiful black spine

Of this lonesome dragon that is born on the earth at last,

My black fire,

Ovoid of my darkness,

Machine-gunned and shattered hillsides of yellow trees

In the autumn of my blood where the apples

Purse their wild lips and smirk knowingly

That my love is dead.

3

Here, carry his splintered bones

Slowly, slowly

Back into the

Tar and chemical strangled tomb,

The strange water, the

Ohio river, that is no tomb to

Rise from the dead

From.

—James Wright