

Leda, Poems. Aldous Huxley

Leda

BROWN and bright as an agate, mountain-cool,  
Eurotas singing slips from pool to pool;  
Down rocky gullies; through the cavernous pines  
And chestnut groves; down where the terraced vines  
And gardens overhang; through valleys grey  
With olive trees, into a soundless bay  
Of the Egean. Silent and asleep  
Lie those pools now: but where they dream most deep,  
Men sometimes see ripples of shining hair  
And the young grace of bodies pale and bare,  
Shimmering far down—the ghosts these mirrors hold  
Of all the beauty they beheld of old,  
White limbs and heavenly eyes and the hair's river of gold,  
For once these banks were peopled: Spartan girls  
Loosed here their maiden girdles and their curls,  
And stooping o'er the level water stole  
His darling mirror from the sun through whole  
Rapturous hours of gazing.  
The first star  
Of all this milky constellation, far  
Lovelier than any nymph of wood or green,  
Was she whom Tyndarus had made his queen  
For her sheer beauty and subtly moving grace—  
Leda, the fairest of our mortal race.  
Hymen had lit his torches but one week  
About her bed (and still o'er her young cheek  
Passed rosy shadows of those thoughts that sped  
Across her mind, still virgin, still unwed,

For all her body was her own no more),  
When Leda with her maidens to the shore  
Of bright Eurotas came, to escape the heat  
Of summer noon in waters coolly sweet.  
By a brown pool which opened smooth and clear  
Below the wrinkled water of a weir  
They sat them down under an old fir-tree  
To rest: and to the laughing melody  
Of their sweet speech the river's rippling bore  
A liquid burden, while the sun did pour  
Pure colour out of heaven upon the earth.  
The meadows seethed with the incessant mirth  
Of grasshoppers, seen only when they flew  
Their curves of scarlet or sudden dazzling blue.  
Within the fir-tree's round of unpierced shade  
The maidens sat with laughter and talk, or played,  
Gravely intent, their game of knuckle-bones;  
Or tossed from hand to hand the old dry cones  
Littered about the tree. And one did sing  
A ballad of some far-off Spartan king,  
Who took a wife, but left her, well-away!  
Slain by his foes upon their wedding-day.  
"That was a piteous story," Leda sighed,  
"To be a widow ere she was a bride."  
"Better," said one, "to live a virgin life  
Alone, and never know the name of wife  
And bear the ugly burden of a child  
And have great pain by it. Let me live wild,  
A bird untamed by man!" "Nay," cried another,  
"I would be wife, if I should not be mother.

Cypris I honour; let the vulgar pay  
Their gross vows to Lucina when they pray.  
Our finer spirits would be blunted quite  
By bestial teeming; but Love's rare delight  
Wings the rapt soul towards Olympus' height."  
"Delight?" cried Leda. "Love to me has brought  
Nothing but pain and a world of shameful thought.  
When they say love is sweet, the poets lie;  
'Tis but a trick to catch poor maidens by.  
What are their boasted pleasures? I am queen  
To the most royal king the world has seen;  
Therefore I should, if any woman might,  
Know at its full that exquisite delight.  
Yet these few days since I was made a wife  
Have held more bitterness than all my life,  
While I was yet a child." The great bright tears  
Slipped through her lashes. "Oh, my childish years!  
Years that were all my own, too sadly few,  
When I was happy—and yet never knew  
How happy till to-day!" Her maidens came  
About her as she wept, whispering her name,  
Leda, sweet Leda, with a hundred dear  
Caressing words to soothe her heavy cheer.  
At last she started up with a fierce pride  
Upon her face. "I am a queen," she cried,  
"But had forgotten it a while; and you,  
Wenches of mine, you were forgetful too.  
Undress me. We would bathe ourself." So proud  
A queen she stood, that all her maidens bowed  
In trembling fear and scarcely dared approach

To do her bidding. But at last the brooch  
Pinned at her shoulder is undone, the wide  
Girdle of silk beneath her breasts untied;  
The tunic falls about her feet, and she  
Steps from the crocus folds of drapery,  
Dazzlingly naked, into the warm sun.  
God-like she stood; then broke into a run,  
Leaping and laughing in the light, as though  
Life through her veins coursed with so swift a flow  
Of generous blood and fire that to remain  
Too long in statted queenliness were pain  
To that quick soul, avid of speed and joy.  
She ran, easily bounding, like a boy,  
Narrow of haunch and slim and firm of breast.  
Lovelier she seemed in motion than at rest,  
If that might be, when she was never less,  
Moving or still, than perfect loveliness.  
At last, with cheeks afire and heaving flank,  
She checked her race, and on the river's bank  
Stood looking down at her own echoed shape  
And at the fish that, aimlessly agape,  
Hung midway up their heaven of flawless glass,  
Like angels waiting for eternity to pass.  
Leda drew breath and plunged; her gasping cry  
Splashed up; the water circled brokenly  
Out from that pearly shudder of dipped limbs;  
The glittering pool laughed up its flowery brims,  
And everything, save the poor fish, rejoiced:  
Their idiot contemplation of the Moist,  
The Cold, the Watery, was in a trice

Ended when Leda broke their crystal paradise.  
Jove in his high Olympian chamber lay  
Hugely supine, striving to charm away  
In sleep the long, intolerable noon.  
But heedless Morpheus still withheld his boon,  
And Jove upon his silk-pavilioned bed  
Tossed wrathful and awake. His fevered head  
Swarmed with a thousand fancies, which forecast  
Delights to be, or savoured pleasures past.  
Closing his eyes, he saw his eagle swift,  
Headlong as his own thunder, stoop and lift  
On pinions upward labouring the prize  
Of beauty ravished for the envious skies.  
He saw again that bright, adulterous pair,  
Trapped by the limping husband unaware,  
Fast in each other's arms, and faster in the snare—  
And laughed remembering. Sometimes his thought  
Went wandering over the earth and sought  
Familiar places—temples by the sea,  
Cities and islands; here a sacred tree  
And there a cavern of shy nymphs.  
He rolled  
About his bed, in many a rich fold  
Crumpling his Babylonian coverlet,  
And yawned and stretched. The smell of his own sweat  
Brought back to mind his Libyan desert-fane  
Of mottled granite, with its endless train  
Of pilgrim camels, reeking towards the sky  
Ammonian incense to his hornèd deity;  
The while their masters worshipped, offering

Huge teeth of ivory, while some would bring  
Their Ethiop wives—sleek wineskins of black silk,  
Jellied and huge from drinking asses' milk  
Through years of tropical idleness, to pray  
For offspring (whom he ever sent away  
With prayers unanswered, lest their ebon race  
Might breed and blacken the earth's comely face).  
Noon pressed on him a hotter, heavier weight.  
O Love in Idleness! how celibate  
He felt! Libido like a nemesis  
Scourged him with itching memories of bliss.  
The satin of imagined skin was sleek  
And supple warm against his lips and cheek,  
And deep within soft hair's dishevelled dusk  
His eyelids fluttered; like a flowery musk  
The scent of a young body seemed to float  
Faintly about him, close and yet remote—  
For perfume and the essence of music dwell  
In other worlds among the asphodel  
Of unembodied life. Then all had flown;  
His dream had melted. In his bed, alone,  
Jove sweating lay and moaned, and longed in vain  
To still the pulses of his burning pain.  
In sheer despair at last he leapt from bed,  
Opened the window and thrust forth his head  
Into Olympian ether. One fierce frown  
Rifted the clouds, and he was looking down  
Into a gulf of azure calm; the rack  
Seethed round about, tempestuously black;  
But the god's eye could hold its angry thunders back.

There lay the world, down through the chasméd blue,  
Stretched out from edge to edge unto his view;  
And in the midst, bright as a summer's day  
At breathless noon, the Mediterranean lay;  
And Ocean round the world's dim fringes tossed  
His glaucous waves in mist and distance lost;  
And Pontus and the livid Caspian Sea  
Stirred in their nightmare sleep uneasily.  
And 'twixt the seas rolled the wide fertile land,  
Dappled with green and tracts of tawny sand,  
And rich, dark fallows and fields of flowers aglow  
And the white, changeless silences of snow;  
While here and there towns, like a living eye  
Unclosed on earth's blind face, towards the sky  
Glanced their bright conscious beauty. Yet the sight  
Of his fair earth gave him but small delight  
Now in his restlessness: its beauty could  
Do nought to quench the fever in his blood.  
Desire lends sharpness to his searching eyes;  
Over the world his focused passion flies  
Quicker than chasing sunlight on a day  
Of storm and golden April. Far away  
He sees the tranquil rivers of the East,  
Mirrors of many a strange barbaric feast,  
Where un-Hellenic dancing-girls contort  
Their yellow limbs, and gibbering masks make sport  
Under the moons of many-coloured light  
That swing their lantern-fruitage in the night  
Of overarching trees. To him it seems  
An alien world, peopled by insane dreams.

But these are nothing to the monstrous shapes—  
Not men so much as bastardy of apes—  
That meet his eyes in Africa. Between  
Leaves of grey fungoid pulp and poisonous green,  
White eyes from black and browless faces stare.  
Dryads with star-flowers in their woolly hair  
Dance to the flaccid clapping of their own  
Black dangling dugs through forests overgrown,  
Platted with writhing creepers. Horrified,  
He sees them how they leap and dance, or glide,  
Glimpse after black glimpse of a satin skin,  
Among unthinkable flowers, to pause and grin  
Out through a trellis of suppurating lips,  
Of mottled tentacles barbed at the tips  
And bloated hands and wattles and red lobes  
Of pendulous gristle and enormous probes  
Of pink and slashed and tasselled flesh . . .  
He turns  
Northward his sickened sight. The desert burns  
All life away. Here in the forkéd shade  
Of twin-humped towering dromedaries laid,  
A few gaunt folk are sleeping: fierce they seem  
Even in sleep, and restless as they dream.  
He would be fearful of a desert bride  
As of a brown asp at his sleeping side,  
Fearful of her white teeth and cunning arts.  
Further, yet further, to the ultimate parts  
Of the wide earth he looks, where Britons go  
Painted among their swamps, and through the snow  
Huge hairy snuffling beasts pursue their prey—



Fierce men, as hairy and as huge as they.  
Bewildered furrows deepen the Thunderer's scowl;  
This world so vast, so variously foul—  
Who can have made its ugliness? In what  
Revolting fancy were the Forms begot  
Of all these monsters? What strange deity—  
So barbarously not a Greek!—was he  
Who could mismake such beings in his own  
Distorted image. Nay, the Greeks alone  
Were men; in Greece alone were bodies fair,  
Minds comely. In that all-but-island there,  
Cleaving the blue sea with its promontories,  
Lies the world's hope, the seed of all the glories  
That are to be; there, too, must surely live  
She who alone can medicinably give  
Ease with her beauty to the Thunderer's pain.  
Downwards he bends his fiery eyes again,  
Glaring on Hellas. Like a beam of light,  
His intent glances touch the mountain height  
With passing flame and probe the valleys deep,  
Rift the dense forest and the age-old sleep  
Of vaulted antres on whose pebbly floor  
Gallop the loud-hoofed Centaurs; and the roar  
Of more than human shouting underground  
Pulses in living palpable waves of sound  
From wall to wall, until it rumbles out  
Into the air; and at that hollow shout  
That seems an utterance of the whole vast hill,  
The shepherds cease their laughter and are still.  
Cities asleep under the noonday sky

Stir at the passage of his burning eye;  
And in their huts the startled peasants blink  
At the swift flash that bursts through every chink  
Of wattled walls, hearkening in fearful wonder  
Through lengthened seconds for the crash of thunder—  
Which follows not: they are the more afraid.  
Jove seeks amain. Many a country maid,  
Whose sandalled feet pass down familiar ways  
Among the olives, but whose spirit strays  
Through lovelier lands of fancy, suddenly  
Starts broad awake out of her dream to see  
A light that is not of the sun, a light  
Darted by living eyes, consciously bright;  
She sees and feels it like a subtle flame  
Mantling her limbs with fear and maiden shame  
And strange desire. Longing and terrified,  
She hides her face, like a new-wedded bride  
Who feels rough hands that seize and hold her fast;  
And swooning falls. The terrible light has passed;  
She wakes; the sun still shines, the olive trees  
Tremble to whispering silver in the breeze  
And all is as it was, save she alone  
In whose dazed eyes this deathless light has shone:  
For never, never from this day forth will she  
In earth's poor passion find felicity,  
Or love of mortal man. A god's desire  
Has seared her soul; nought but the same strong fire  
Can kindle the dead ash to life again,  
And all her years will be a lonely pain.  
Many a thousand had he looked upon,

Thousands of mortals, young and old; but none—  
Virgin, or young ephebus, or the flower  
Of womanhood culled in its full-blown hour—  
Could please the Thunderer's sight or touch his mind;  
The longed-for loveliness was yet to find.  
Had beauty fled, and was there nothing fair  
Under the moon? The fury of despair  
Raged in the breast of heaven's Almighty Lord;  
He gnashed his foamy teeth and rolled and roared  
In bull-like agony. Then a great calm  
Descended on him: cool and healing balm  
Touched his immortal fury. He had spied  
Young Leda where she stood, poised on the river-side.  
Even as she broke the river's smooth expanse,  
Leda was conscious of that hungry glance,  
And knew it for an eye of fearful power  
That did so hot and thunderously lour,  
She knew not whence, on her frail nakedness.  
Jove's heart held but one thought: he must possess  
That perfect form or die—possess or die.  
Unheeded prayers and supplications fly,  
Thick as a flock of birds, about his ears,  
And smoke of incense rises; but he hears  
Nought but the soft falls of that melody  
Which is the speech of Leda; he can see  
Nought but that almost spiritual grace  
Which is her body, and that heavenly face  
Where gay, sweet thoughts shine through, and eyes are bright  
With purity and the soul's inward light.  
Have her he must: the teasel-fingered burr

Sticks not so fast in a wild beast's tangled fur  
As that insistent longing in the soul  
Of mighty Jove. Gods, men, earth, heaven, the whole  
Vast universe was blotted from his thought  
And nought remained but Leda's laughter, nought  
But Leda's eyes. Magnified by his lust,  
She was the whole world now; have her he must, he must . . .  
His spirit worked; how should he gain his end  
With most deliciousness? What better friend,  
What counsellor more subtle could he find  
Than lovely Aphrodite, ever kind  
To hapless lovers, ever cunning, too,  
In all the tortuous ways of love to do  
And plan the best? To Paphos then! His will  
And act were one; and straight, invisible,  
He stood in Paphos, breathing the languid air  
By Aphrodite's couch. O heavenly fair  
She was, and smooth and marvellously young!  
On Tyrian silk she lay, and purple hung  
About her bed in folds of fluted light  
And shadow, dark as wine. Two doves, more white  
Even than the white hand on the purple lying  
Like a pale flower wearily dropped, were flying  
With wings that made an odoriferous stir,  
Dropping faint dews of bakkaris and myrrh,  
Musk and the soul of sweet flowers cunningly  
Ravished from transient petals as they die.  
Two stripling cupids on her either hand  
Stood near with winnowing plumes and gently fanned  
Her hot, love-fevered cheeks and eyelids burning.

Another, crouched at the bed's foot, was turning  
A mass of scattered parchments—vows or plaints  
Or glad triumphant thanks which Venus' saints,  
Martyrs and heroes, on her altars strewed  
With bitterest tears or gifts of gratitude.  
From the pile heaped at Aphrodite's feet  
The boy would take a leaf, and in his sweet,  
Clear voice would read what mortal tongues can tell  
In stammering verse of those ineffable  
Pleasures and pains of love, heaven and uttermost hell.  
Jove hidden stood and heard him read these lines  
Of votive thanks—

Cypris, this little silver lamp to thee

I dedicate.

It was my fellow-watcher, shared with me

Those swift, short hours, when raised above my fate

In Sphenura's white arms I drank

Of immortality.

"A pretty lamp, and I will have it placed

Beside the narrow bed of some too chaste

Sister of virgin Artemis, to be

A night-long witness of her cruelty.

Read me another, boy," and Venus bent

Her ear to listen to this short lament.

Cypris, Cypris, I am betrayed!

Under the same wide mantle laid

I found them, faithless, shameless pair!

Making love with tangled hair.

"Alas," the goddess cried, "nor god, nor man,

Nor medicinale balm, nor magic can

Cast out the demon jealousy, whose breath  
Withers the rose of life, save only time and death."

Another sheet he took and read again.

Farewell to love, and hail the long, slow pain

Of memory that backward turns to joy.

O I have danced enough and enough sung;

My feet shall be still now and my voice mute;

Thine are these withered wreaths, this Lydian flute,

Cypris; I once was young.

And piêtous Aphrodite wept to think

How fadingly upon death's very brink

Beauty and love take hands for one short kiss—

And then the wreaths are dust, the bright-eyed bliss

Perished, and the flute still. "Read on, read on."

But ere the page could start, a lightning shone

Suddenly through the room, and they were 'ware

Of some great terrible presence looming there.

And it took shape—huge limbs, whose every line

A symbol was of power and strength divine,

And it was Jove.

"Daughter, I come," said he,

"For counsel in a case that touches me

Close, to the very life." And he straightway

Told her of all his restlessness that day

And of his sight of Leda, and how great

Was his desire. And so in close debate

Sat the two gods, planning their rape; while she,

Who was to be their victim, joyously

Laughed like a child in the sudden breathless chill

And splashed and swam, forgetting every ill

And every fear and all, save only this:  
That she was young, and it was perfect bliss  
To be alive where suns so goldenly shine,  
And bees go drunk with fragrant honey-wine,  
And the cicadas sing from morn till night,  
And rivers run so cool and pure and bright . . .  
Stretched all her length, arms under head, she lay  
In the deep grass, while the sun kissed away  
The drops that sleeked her skin. Slender and fine  
As those old images of the gods that shine  
With smooth-worn silver, polished through the years  
By the touching lips of countless worshippers,  
Her body was; and the sun's golden heat  
Clothed her in softest flame from head to feet  
And was her mantle, that she scarcely knew  
The conscious sense of nakedness. The blue,  
Far hills and the faint fringes of the sky  
Shimmered and pulsed in the heat uneasily,  
And hidden in the grass, cicadas shrill  
Dizzied the air with ceaseless noise, until  
A listener might wonder if they cried  
In his own head or in the world outside.  
Sometimes she shut her eyelids, and wrapped round  
In a red darkness, with the muffled sound  
And throb of blood beating within her brain,  
Savoured intensely to the verge of pain  
Her own young life, hoarded it up behind  
Her shuttered lids, until, too long confined,  
It burst them open and her prisoned soul  
Flew forth and took possession of the whole

Exquisite world about her and was made  
A part of it. Meanwhile her maidens played,  
Singing an ancient song of death and birth,  
Seed-time and harvest, old as the grey earth,  
And moving to their music in a dance  
As immemorial. A numbing trance  
Came gradually over her, as though  
Flake after downy-feathered flake of snow  
Had muffled all her senses, drifting deep  
And warm and quiet.  
From this all-but sleep  
She started into life again; the sky  
Was full of a strange tumult suddenly—  
Beating of mighty wings and shrill-voiced fear  
And the hoarse scream of rapine following near.  
In the high windlessness above her flew,  
Dazzlingly white on the untroubled blue,  
A splendid swan, with outstretched neck and wing  
Spread fathom wide, and closely following  
An eagle, tawny and black. This god-like pair  
Circled and swooped through the calm of upper air,  
The eagle striking and the white swan still  
'Scaping as though by happy miracle  
The imminent talons. For the twentieth time  
The furious hunter stooped, to miss and climb  
A mounting spiral into the height again.  
He hung there poised, eyeing the grassy plain  
Far, far beneath, where the girls' upturned faces  
Were like white flowers that bloom in open places  
Among the scarcely budded woods. And they



Breathlessly watched and waited; long he lay,  
Becalmed upon that tideless sea of light,  
While the great swan with slow and creaking flight  
Went slanting down towards safety, where the stream  
Shines through the trees below, with glance and gleam  
Of blue aerial eyes that seem to give  
Sense to the sightless earth and make it live.  
The ponderous wings beat on and no pursuit:  
Stiff as the painted kite that guards the fruit,  
Afloat o'er orchards ripe, the eagle yet  
Hung as at anchor, seeming to forget  
His uncaught prey, his rage unsatisfied.  
Still, quiet, dead . . . and then the quickest-eyed  
Had lost him. Like a star unsphered, a stone  
Dropped from the vault of heaven, a javelin thrown,  
He swooped upon his prey. Down, down he came,  
And through his plumes with a noise of wind-blown flame  
Loud roared the air. From Leda's lips a cry  
Broke, and she hid her face—she could not see him die,  
Her lovely, hapless swan.  
Ah, had she heard,  
Even as the eagle hurtled past, the word  
That treacherous pair exchanged. "Peace," cried the swan;  
"Peace, daughter. All my strength will soon be gone,  
Wasted in tedious flying, ere I come  
Where my desire hath set its only home."  
"Go," said the eagle, "I have played my part,  
Roused pity for your plight in Leda's heart  
(Pity the mother of voluptuousness).  
Go, father Jove; be happy; for success

Attends this moment."

On the queen's numbed sense  
Fell a glad shout that ended sick suspense,  
Bidding her lift once more towards the light  
Her eyes, by pity closed against a sight  
Of blood and death—her eyes, how happy now  
To see the swan still safe, while far below,  
Brought by the force of his eluded stroke  
So near to earth that with his wings he woke  
A gust whose sudden silvery motion stirred  
The meadow grass, struggled the sombre bird  
Of rage and rapine. Loud his scream and hoarse  
With baffled fury as he urged his course  
Upwards again on threshing pinions wide.  
But the fair swan, not daring to abide  
This last assault, dropped with the speed of fear  
Towards the river. Like a winged spear,  
Outstretching his long neck, rigid and straight,  
Aimed at where Leda on the bank did wait  
With open arms and kind, uplifted eyes  
And voice of tender pity, down he flies.  
Nearer, nearer, terribly swift, he sped  
Directly at the queen; then widely spread  
Resisting wings, and breaking his descent  
'Gainst his own wind, all speed and fury spent,  
The great swan fluttered slowly down to rest  
And sweet security on Leda's breast.  
Menacingly the eagle wheeled above her;  
But Leda, like a noble-hearted lover  
Keeping his child-beloved from tyrannous harm,

Stood o'er the swan and, with one slender arm  
Imperiously lifted, waved away  
The savage foe, still hungry for his prey.  
Baffled at last, he mounted out of sight  
And the sky was void—save for a single white  
Swan's feather moulted from a harassed wing  
That down, down, with a rhythmic balancing  
From side to side dropped sleeping on the air.  
Down, slowly down over that dazzling pair,  
Whose different grace in union was a birth  
Of unimagined beauty on the earth:  
So lovely that the maidens standing round  
Dared scarcely look. Couched on the flowery ground  
Young Leda lay, and to her side did press  
The swan's proud-arching opulent loveliness,  
Stroking the snow-soft plumage of his breast  
With fingers slowly drawn, themselves caressed  
By the warm softness where they lingered, loth  
To break away. Sometimes against their growth  
Ruffling the feathers inlaid like little scales  
On his sleek neck, the pointed finger-nails  
Rasped on the warm, dry, puckered skin beneath;  
And feeling it she shuddered, and her teeth  
Grated on edge; for there was something strange  
And snake-like in the touch. He, in exchange,  
Gave back to her, stretching his eager neck,  
For every kiss a little amorous peck;  
Rubbing his silver head on her gold tresses,  
And with the nip of horny dry caresses  
Leaving upon her young white breast and cheek

And arms the red print of his playful beak.  
Closer he nestled, mingling with the slim  
Austerity of virginal flank and limb  
His curved and florid beauty, till she felt  
That downy warmth strike through her flesh and melt  
The bones and marrow of her strength away.  
One lifted arm bent o'er her brow, she lay  
With limbs relaxed, scarce breathing, deathly still;  
Save when a quick, involuntary thrill  
Shook her sometimes with passing shudderings,  
As though some hand had plucked the aching strings  
Of life itself, tense with expectancy.  
And over her the swan shook slowly free  
The folded glory of his wings, and made  
A white-walled tent of soft and luminous shade  
To be her veil and keep her from the shame  
Of naked light and the sun's noonday flame.  
Hushed lay the earth and the wide, careless sky.  
Then one sharp sound, that might have been a cry  
Of utmost pleasure or of utmost pain,  
Broke sobbing forth, and all was still again.

The end