



POLLY CHANDLER

## Essay #3: Leda And The Swan

a short story by ERIC PUCHNER

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*We came across this story in the 2005 edition of the anthology Best New American Voices (Harcourt), which collects the finest unpublished writing from college writing programs and workshops around the country. We weren't the only ones who fell in love with it, and by the time we inquired about a reprint, it was already part of Eric Puchner's first collection of short fiction, Music through the Floor (Scribner). We're reprinting it here for the benefit of readers who haven't yet discovered Puchner's unique voice. "Essay #3: Leda and the Swan" is excerpted from Music through the Floor, by Eric Puchner. © 2005 by Eric Puchner. It appears here by permission of Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., New York, NY.*

— Ed.

*Although* the swan is not a delicate creature like a butterfly, and is not cuddly and cute like a kitten, it is a living thing that can feel pain and hunger just like any other living creature. In “Leda and the Swan,” by William Butler Yeats, a perverted sort of swan ends up performing sexual intercourse with a loose girl named Leda. The motive of the swan is shown when he performs only a few foreplays, like caressing her “thighs” and gripping her “helpless breast,” before revealing his “feathered glory.”<sup>1</sup> He’s got only one thing on his mind: shuddering his loins. This swan is clearly a sex-starved animal that doesn’t belong in Ireland, let alone a city park! In this essay, I will argue that Mr. Yeats is actually a mentally ill person who lives poetically through swans and furthermore knows nothing about swans and their gentele mating habits.

First of all, Mr. Yeats is a mentally ill person who lives poetically through swans. I know this for a fact because my older sister, Jeanie, is mentally ill and used to write poems about animals before she ran away from home to become a missing person. However, since she isn’t a pervert, the poems were not about intercouring swans. Instead, they were about animals we see on our tables every day. One of the poems (which I still have) goes like this:

*Cow, what do you chew?  
Big peace, bothering no one  
Who later chews you.*<sup>2</sup>

This is not an American poem, because it has syllables. In fact, it is a haiku, which is a popular form of expression in Japan. Jeanie wrote this after I stole her boyfriend and she started to become mentally ill. Mentally ill people come in many different guises, and for Jeanie the guise was Veganism, a religion where you can’t eat eggs or dairy products, such as cows. Like many poets, she has a soul that she wants to communicate with others and liked to put her poems on the refrigerator for everyone to read. Unfortunately, my stepfather, Franz, does not have the soul of a poet, especially if we’re having stroganoff for dinner. Franz would often get angry and make many remarks about cows being more stupid than chickens. Franz grew up on a farm in Bavaria and knows a lot about the stupidity of animals. One poem, in particular, seemed to upset him very much:

*Turkey, my cousin  
We fail to be beautiful  
Punishment: oven.*<sup>3</sup>

Franz was upset because he felt like Thanksgiving dinner wasn’t the best time for the reading of poetry, especially when he was eating a wing belonging to the protagonist of the poem. He said that Jeanie and the turkey must really be related if she would ruin a family get-together by reading a poem about the stupidest animal on Earth. Franz said that turkeys were so stupid you couldn’t leave them out in the rain or else they’d drown. In fact, his family had lost a perfectly good turkey in Bavaria because his father had left it out in a thunderstorm by

accident. Jeanie asked him if we should kill retarded people too because they’re less intelligent than us, and Franz said no, we should leave them out in the rain first and see what happens. This made me laugh, but Jeanie didn’t think it was very funny. She called him a Nazi. This was very bad, and mentally ill, because Franz is not a Nazi even though he thinks Germany’s the best country in the world.

Actually, Jeanie was upset because I’d invited Colin, her ex-boyfriend, to dinner. I didn’t feel too bad because they’d only dated for two months before Colin dumped her, and surely Jeanie should have seen the perfect destiny of our match. Later Colin told me the truth, which was that he’d only gotten to know Jeanie in the first place because he was in love with me on account of my facial beauty. I can tell you right now that my sister’s not so facially victorious. She’s got our dad’s nose, which is a shame because my mom’s been married three times since my dad and all of our stepfathers have had noses that didn’t say from across the street hello I’m a nose.

Anyway, Colin’s dumping her for my less-visible features may have had something to do with Jeanie’s mental collapse. Poets are very unstable people who often go crazy or die, and I should say that Colin is very handsome and popular and we were all surprised when he decided to date Jeanie in the first place. He is in a band called Salacious Universe and has long hair and these perfect gold arms like when you put honey on toast (except there aren’t usually hairs in your toast). He is a construction worker on the weekends and looking at his arms kind of makes me wiggle my toes in an unvolunteering way until my sandals fall off. The wiggling was inaugurated at my first Salacious Universe concert. As it turned out, Jeanie couldn’t go to the concert because she was attending a Vegan rally in front of the Safeway near our house. The concert was in the school auditorium (maybe you remember, Mr. Patterson, the flyers with Colin’s hands shooting thunderbolts?), and I went with my friends Tamara and Tamara. It’s a little weird how they have the same name, but neither of them wants to be called Tammy or Tams or Mara or any nickname I can think of because that would mean the other one got to keep their real name and she didn’t.

So we were waiting for Salacious Universe to come out, sitting in the front row actually, when Colin pranced onto the stage like a two-legged deer and picked up this guitar he has with a bumper sticker on it that says FEAR ME, BRETHREN. It was very hot in the auditorium, and I could smell the aroma of many armpits rafting in my direction. After the cheering died down, Colin started singing and his face kind of went fierce and angry and these very sexy wrinkles formed between his eyebrows. I said Tamara and she said what and I said no,

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1. William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poems and Three Plays* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), lines 2–6.

2. Jeanie Mudbrook, “Cow Song,” lines 1–3.

3. Mudbrook, “Ugliness,” lines 1–3.

Tamara, and she said what and I said isn't he the most incredible human being of the male persuasion on planet Earth and she said yeah I don't know what he sees in Jeanie the haikuist freak. Salacious Universe plays speed-metal music, which if you don't know is very difficult and requires you to change fingers all the time. They started right away to perform masterpieces and I knew immediately that I was destined to live my life with Colin Sweep, lead singer of Salacious Universe. The only problem was Jeanie, but I tried not to be a victim of negative thinking and dwell on the fact that she was dating my destiny. Colin is an idiot savant, which means he could play music with better lyrics than William Butler Yeats even though he was failing trigonometry, chemistry, American history, Spanish, and (far as I know) this class as well. In any case, Colin had us all riveted to his lips as he sang the chorus to one of his tour de forces:

*All you mortals, I can and will bend  
Cuz I'm the father of gods and men!*<sup>4</sup>

Believe me, everyone was screaming and wanting to inter-course him if they were either female or homosexual.

Then something happened that wasn't in the program. Right when Colin was achieving the height of his genius, there was a blackout and everything went dark. You could hear the band playing in the dark, but the electricity was gone and it was just a ghost sound and not the real thing, like when you're talking to your step-grandparents in Germany and your voice comes back to you all small and distant on the phone. Then the lights went on again and Colin was shocked. I mean "shocked" in the electrical sense, because the microphone made a weird zapping sound and Colin's hair stood up into a punk-rock hairstyle and he flew across the stage like a migrant bird. Everyone was concerned about his general health, including me, and I ran up onstage to give him mouth-to-mouth. By the time I got there, though, he'd already half recovered and was blinking into space with a very sedated expression that said I'm having a one-on-one interview with the light.

That's how we ended up backstage, me and Tamara and Tamara. We were delighted to be official Salacious Universe groupies, even though I was clearly the main one and they were really just groupies of me. It was cooler behind the stage and I furthered the recovery of Colin's head by resting it against a papier-mâché stump. He knew who I was, of course, but I had

to introduce him to the Tamaras since they were persistent in their appearance. He found it supremely cool that they had the same name, and Tamara and Tamara were both sort of non-plucked because they did not secretly believe it was cool at all. Tamara asked him why the song was called "Pagan Liver" since it had nothing to do with body parts, and he explained that it wasn't supposed to be a part of the body at all but a person who lives, like you're a Pagan and you live that way.

After packing up his stuff, Colin asked me if I wanted to walk with him to the pay phone on the other side of campus. (I didn't offer my cellphone, because I'd never walked even a few feet with a famous guitarist.) The stars were shining like distant balls of gas, and you could see the janitors sitting on the roof of the library, sharing a cigarette. It was all very peaceful and beautiful with the janitors talking in Spanish and the imported words floating on top of our heads. Everything was really quiet except for the inside of Colin's pocket, which jingled with coins on account of his pinball-playing habit. That was when he told me that he liked the way I looked. His hair was still sticking magically from his head, all bright and glowing, like each hair was partaking in photosynthesis from the moon. He said he was going to call Jeanie and tell her he couldn't take her to Hailu's Tofu Palace because something had come up, something unexpected, without telling her of course it was a secret crush on my face.

But then something truly unexpected happened. When he tried to put a quarter in the pay phone, it refused to part from his finger. He shook his hand, but the quarter just remained there, magnetically attracted to his skin. Colin looked kind of worried and then stuck his hand in his pocket again and pulled it out and there were quarters stuck to each of his fingers, like a mini-family of George Washingtons with very long necks. Of course, it scared me a little that his fingers could behave so strangely. After a minute, Colin's face sort of changed, and he got this weird grin and wiggled his fingers and they glittered in the moonlight. He touched one of the coin-fingers to my mouth, which caused a tiny spark to enter my lips and electrocute the butterflies in my stomach. I have to admit, it was spooky and frightening and very breathtaking but also the most exciting thing that has happened in my life up till now.<sup>5</sup>

So that was how I ended up stealing Jeanie's boyfriend. I know it isn't cool to steal other people's boyfriends, especially if those people are your flesh-and-bones sister, and as a general rule I try to avoid it — but this was destiny and you only get

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4. Colin Sweep, "Pagan Liver," 2003.

5. Mr. Patterson, I know this is supposed to be a paper about literature, and the particular literature named "Leda and the Swan," but you also said that we could use examples from our own life if we found something of "universal interest." That's why I've departed on a tangent and am writing this essay about love. I guarantee, universally, if you asked people which they'd prefer — a topic about LOVE or one about PERVERTED SWANS — they'd choose mine in a second.

one chance to fill it or else it flaps away into the starry universe. When I got home from the concert, I found Jeanie waiting on the porch in her favorite skirt and leather-free high heels. I realized that Colin had forgotten to call her on account of his fingers being so talented. Because I'm a very honest person, I told her in a considerate way that Colin had fallen in love with me, that he was very sorry for the misunderstanding about dating her to begin with. Jeanie just stared at me with this little smirk on her face, like she was experiencing some gas in her stomach. Jeanie's got these very smirkable bee-stung lips that kind of complement the humongous bee that must have stung her nose. She had an unburning cigarette in her hand and she started to tear off little pieces from the end of it, sprinkling the pieces on the porch like she was trying to grow a tobacco tree. (Even though she's a Vegan, she smokes about five hundred cigarettes in her bathroom every day, which seems a little contradicting to her cause.) This was about when I started to appreciate her mental illness. I mean, if you're mentally all right, and you've just found out that your boyfriend's dumped you for your sister, possibly because you're nasally obese, then wouldn't you be a little upset? An hour later, when I went downstairs to get some water before bed, I looked through the window and saw Jeanie sitting out there in the exact same place as before, hunched there in her skirt, even though Franz said it was cold enough to freeze the testicles off a brass monkey.

Jeanie didn't speak to me at all until Thanksgiving, when I invited Colin to the house and she read her Vegan haiku out loud before taping it to the refrigerator. To be honest, I was very hesitant to invite Colin at all, not only on account of Jeanie but because my mom is not a very gifted cook and likes to serve Bavarian carp salad as a tribute to Franz's ancestors. After Jeanie called him a Nazi, we were all sitting there very much alarmed because she stomped around the room and said "Hi Hitler!" until our plates shook and the saltshaker tipped over on the table. I knew she was really directing her Nazi-bashing at me and Colin, even though she'd ignored both of us since the beginning of dinner. She was wearing a Salacious Universe t-shirt with no bra underneath and her hair was very oily and Jamaican-looking. Franz grabbed her by the arm and forced her to sit down, saying he'd have her delivered to a mental institution if she didn't stop mistaking his identity. Hitler was a very evil man, but my stepfather is just a bald person who owns a tire shop and likes to watch women's volleyball on Channel 39. My mom was incredibly pleasureless because she'd made Jeanie a special turkey-free dinner with Not Dogs and thought it would be nice to put some gravy on them, not thinking that gravy is made from the destruction of living creatures and their boiled necks. She finished her glass of white wine and started to get very sympathetic with the turkey's plight, apologizing to the neckless bird when Franz broke off a wing or a drum-

stick. We all kind of lost our appetites, even Franz, who just sat there silently chewing without looking at anyone.

Jeanie looked at me for the first time and then picked up a knife from the table and pointed it in my direction. Her face was very decomposed, and for a second I thought she might try to stab me. But then she turned to Colin and said that he was a slut who only cared about getting intercoursed and didn't he remember how she'd written all of his songs anyway and what was he going to do now, since he couldn't even spell *gargoyle*? What about moving to Hollywood and being speed metalists together, like they'd planned? She was kind of smirking and crying at the same time. It's true that they were friends before they'd started to date, but I didn't believe that she'd written any of his Salacious Universe masterpieces, even though he did look a little sad when she insulted his spelling. Obviously, Jeanie was just tortured with jealousy. I can't help it if I'm genetically attractive and have perfect skin and hazel eyes.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes she reminds me of Othello in the book we read by William Shakespeare, even though he was a mentally ill African American with no real reason to act that way.

The next day Colin took me to get a tattoo, my first ever, which I designed myself because I wanted something totally original if I was going to beautify my ankle on a permanent basis. Of course I didn't tell Jeanie, who avoided me the whole week, even when she came downstairs one night to watch a sleep-inducing documentary about the Animal Liberation Front. I couldn't help noticing that she was boycotting brassieres as well as meat. When the scab came off my ankle, though, I was so excited that I forgot about Jeanie's green-eyed jealousy and actually stopped her in the hall to show it to her. She lost her smirk for a second and seemed genuinely very surprised. After a brief silence, we had a conversation that I've tried to record here for prosperity:

JEANIE: You received a tattoo of a TV set?

ME: It is not a TV set. It's a cobra.

JEANIE: I know I'm a mentally ill person who suffers from hallucinations, but it looks just like a TV.

ME: In reality, the cobra is coiled up in a basket. Like a snake charmer's. That's its head.

JEANIE: Why the [intercourse] does it have antenna?

ME: Those are bolts of electricity. From its eyes.

JEANIE: Ha ha ha ha! (*mentally ill laughter*)

(*end of excerpt*)

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6. *I'm sorry to keep stressing this, Mr. Patterson, but I also want to make sure you know who I am since you always confuse me in class with Maria Zellmer, who sits in the back corner and digs the earwax from her ears.*