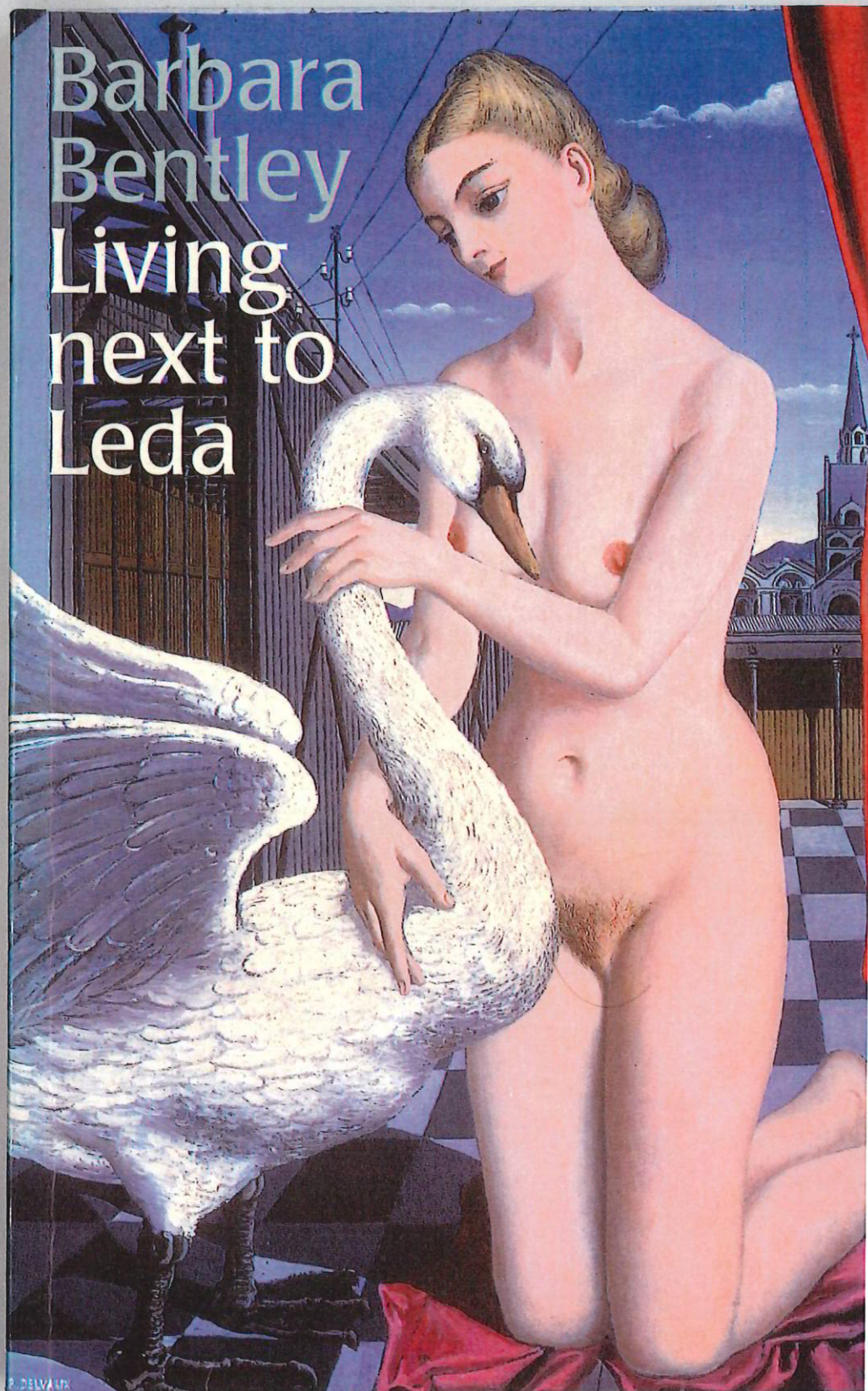


Barbara
Bentley
Living
next to
Leda



Living Next to Leda

i.

Leda swore she could hear a swan. I ask you. A swan. They're supposed to be mute. But she insisted the noise came across as white sound.

Leda had a nervous tic triggered by sparrows that twitched in her garden. She said they flitted about like bits of grit granted flight. When she got jittery, she tuned into white sound, more calming than a tranquiliser. At dusk, she strolled to the park and watched swans nuzzling in lint-soft wings. According to Leda, swans have poise.

Not like sparrows. Once, one bashed against Leda's pane. There were feathers and beads unstrung on glass like the stuff which sticks to free range eggs. She couldn't touch it. She cringed. So I put the kettle on and cleaned it up, while she rocked and focussed on white sound. For weeks she was calm, until a sparrow flew in. She had to brace herself to cup the moth-cased heart. A choke of fluff and the tickle of spindly legs was still on her palms, she said, days later, on her way to the park. Her pockets bulged with bread.

ii.

They took her in. Crazy Leda who heard swans and sat by the lake in the dark was found in her Hygena-white bedroom, smothering bruises in an eiderdown quilt and pillows stuffed with real curled feathers.

I went to visit. She asked for slices of bread which she crammed in her locker. On bad days she flew from room to room, chasing something. Swansong, she said. Poor Leda. A bundle of nerves. When she crashed into walls, they had to restrain her.

I don't breathe a word of Leda's version: how a cygnet approached, not in fury but as an emissary. She stroked angel wings, and drawn by the flame that tipped the bill, she entered the jet eye and was transformed.

Whatever happened, it was all hushed up. She's stabilised now. Soon, there'll be twins. I imagine her weaning two scrawny fledglings, open-mouthed and insistent for more, more, while the bastard that did this flies free.

Siren

It's just a game. A mermaid
blows her siren song
in the North Atlantic cold,
luring sailors who steer
the southern track through
bitter waters. *Ring-a-ting-a-roses*
she sings, checking for blemishes
in her compact mirror,
watching the floating palace
steaming towards her.
She garlands her hair
with a pocketful of posies,
hoping a sailor will notice her.

In sharp air, she senses
Marconi patter — three dashes,
three dots, three dashes. So,
her rhyme has charmed one.
She waits on ice, preening herself,
jollied along by the distant
sounds of the palace band —
ragtime rhythms, French songs.
Then a hymnal as the ship lists,
its constellation of lights
eclipsed in black waters.
Atchoo, Atchoo,
they all go down.

Down at the bottom, she moves
amongst dummies. Whoo. So many.
Furs and jewels cling to some.
Through cracked Versailles mirrors
they wear silly fairground faces.
Her fishtail smacks against heavy limbs
as she weaves in and out,
dodging dead men's fingers.

Before mother calls, asking
what the hell she's been doing,
she will find her sailor. She will thrust
her mouth to his. Give him the roaring sea.

Medusa

It was easy. She stole into his house
while the wife was out.
They couldn't help themselves.
She was sure there was something in it.

Come morning, grit scratches at
the soft membrane of her eye.
She searches for the irritant.
But there's nothing in it.

Doctor beams in on the cornea.
He offers drops, assuring her
that there's nothing in it.
Whatever was in it, is gone.

But she can't open it.
Pus solders her lashes.
The kids avert their eyes
from the eye with nothing in it

but venom. She wonders why
she never saw it coming –
this foreign body, infecting
the livid folds of her lower lid.

But now she sees
there was never anything in it,
she will fix him.
He will turn to stone.

Eye Test

When he looms before her,
the pin light of his torch
pricking her pupils, she can see
his strafed skin, so cratered
because he is less than an eyelash away.
There is a glisten that could be orange zest.
She can see his nostrils, at this range
dark and filamented, and feel his breath
warning her cheek like a soft touch.

She wonders how she must seem to him –
whether her blemishes are magnified,
or whether his professional stance
has made him myopic, or blind.

So this transaction is a tacit agreement
that the two parties decline the invitation
of a lover's intimacy.

Unless she misreads his enlarged smile
and the braille of his fingers
smoothing hair behind ears
as he comes in close for the fitting.