

And round that early-laurelled head  
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,  
And find unwithered on its curls  
The garland briefer than a girl's.

(1896)

## LOVELIEST OF TREES

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride,  
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.

10

(1896)

## William Butler Yeats 1865–1939

### THE SECOND COMING

Turning and turning in the widening gyre<sup>1</sup>  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*:<sup>2</sup>  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

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<sup>1</sup>A spiral motion, used by Yeats to suggest the cycles of history.

<sup>2</sup>The Soul of the World, a collective unconscious from which humans draw memories, symbols, dreams.

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

20

(1921)

## 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.

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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?

(1923)

## SAILING TO BYZANTIUM<sup>1</sup>

That is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
—Those dying generations—at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unaging intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless

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<sup>1</sup>The capital of the Byzantine Empire, the city now called Istanbul; for Yeats, a symbol of life perfected by art.

And retreated, not to affright it;  
 And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,  
 We watched the sleek, wild, dark  
 And iridescent creature  
 Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove  
 To the hard floor, or the desk-top,  
 And wait then, humped and bloody,  
 For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits  
 Rose when, suddenly sure,  
 It lifted off from a chair-back,  
 Beating a smooth course for the right window  
 And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,  
 Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish  
 What I wished you before, but harder.

(1971)

## Mona Van Duyn 1921-

### LEDA

*"Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"*

Not even for a moment. He knew, for one thing, what he was.  
 When he saw the swan in her eyes he could let her drop.  
 In the first look of love men find their great disguise,  
 and collecting these rare pictures of himself was his life.  
 Her body became the consequence of his juice,  
 while her mind closed on a bird and went to sleep.  
 Later, with the children in school, she opened her eyes  
 and saw her own openness, and felt relief.  
 In men's stories her life ended with his loss.  
 She stiffened under the storm of his wings to a glassy shape,  
 stricken and mysterious and immortal. But the fact is,  
 she was not, for such an ending, abstract enough.

She tried for a while to understand what it was  
 that had happened, and then decided to let it drop.  
 She married a smaller man with a beaky nose,  
 and melted away in the storm of everyday life.

(1964)