

Five Lovesongs

1. Chase's Tune (Lower Manhattan, December, 2001)

Once upon a time Chase chose a puppet master, all strings attached. He's fallen down on the job. Puppeteer now Puppet. Change pulls the strings. The hands have been dealt. The Puppet can't even hold his cards.

Chase, enslaved by chance to change, is chained to her pretty, suffering Puppet, gets to grow old beside him. Then grow old alone. Change cannot serve Chase. Change is reality's slave. Chase wants a chance.

On a whim, she morphs into Chance. It only takes two letters. She soars like a rainbow looking for a honeypot. Chance glimpses scintillating platitudes. "The only sign of life is change." "It all depends on you."

It's all Chance now. Chase was a babe, Chance is a bauble, Chance is still Chase, in hiding. Chance could morph into Change. It only takes one letter. But Chance takes no chances. Chance does not want to change.

Change is abusive. Chaste? Not bloody likely, dear reader. Amazing things, those biological imperatives. Ambushed, Chance falls in lust. It's a gamble. She wants to play it both ways. One man behind each bedroom door.

Lock them in drawers, compartments, the bower, the shower, put each man in his place. One man behind each bedroom door. A game of Chance. Only open a door when it's safe to go in. Seal it tight when she leaves.

Two separate realities, never let them meet. She can't reconcile herself with herself. Chance smells a stalemate. A stale mate. She hates that smell. Her friends are sympathetic, patient, bored, judgmental: "You're not a kid any more."

She can't hear that platitude. Too much static. "If you don't change when needed, things will be changed for you." Infuriating platitudes. "Things happen." "There's something good in everything." So why does Chance keep refusing to play the game?

Too much to lose. Enraged, Chance resists Change. She still wants Chase, hope, magic. Short skirts. She trips lightly, flipping her skirts, slipping past the quicksand of twinkling silicate platitudes. "Seek Clarity." "Give Thanks."

Her resistance, dear Reader, is like fireworks over the Statue of Liberty. Showers of sparks, senseless explosions. Frazzled, frizzled, fizzle. Chance going nowhere. Wired. Static. Blinking red stoplight. Bloody warning.

All will be struggle. She knows if she has to be carried off kicking and screaming, she's insisting on the wrong thing. Chance reasons with herself. "Hey Channie, Channie, Channie, why do you feel trapped in your life?"

"It's not so bad." Just quit, surrender, maybe she'll become Ex-static. "Give thanks for trouble, give thanks for evil." Skipping platitudes, she trips, trips up, flounders. Rubs her face in them. She's sinking, dear Reader.

She sandbags her fear with grit, with granular anger. She licks the free flow from the dying Organism. That's what she calls it, the Organism. At the end of the chase, Chase had decided that Love creates a new Organism.

It has a life of its own. As Chance would have it, she remembers. The Lovers are its organs. 50% Chance, 50% genetic mishap. For the Organism to survive, everyone has to work together. To prevent organ failure.

The other organ takes over, compensates, labours to keep it going as long as possible. One day the world falls. Pas de Chance. Crashing black nets of flaming destruction. People flee around them. The Puppet becomes a breathing Statue.

Chance rescues the Statue. Lucky Chance. She drags it home, sets it up in the living room. Out the window, the stage set for Dante's inferno. The Gods have spoken at last. It's a Pas de Deux. Pas trois.

Out there, it's supposed to be over, but inside, it's closing down, fewer possible outlets. No Chance to plug in. The immediate territory a war zone. Soon there will be no way out at all. Just Chance and The Statue.

Chance's flailing ego keeps fighting with the failing Organism. Ego VS Organism, wrestling. The Statue ruled by Chance, spun by the whims of Chance. Inevitably, one day, Change will come. Chance alone.

The Loudspeaker keeps repeating: "It would be easier to die." But she can't die, it would kill the Organism. She's not that mean. So why, good God, does she keep this up? Because she can't dare to be soft, dear Reader.

One morning the Statue is sleeping. But she can still hear its heart. Her own heart begins singing gently. Chanting the Chance she must not miss. Its song is Clarity filtering through the static. Her heart is singing:

"Go gentle,
Go gentle, my Statue,
Go gentle, my beloved, Chance is with you."

2. Sunstroke

Swimming the backstroke nobody
can see where they're going.
Count 10 laps for 500 yards,
count 24 strokes each way
so you don't

swim into the wall at the deep
end. To steer,
to stay in lane, align your flutter
toes with that pine tree standing
at the shallow end.

She swims blind, belly up in the sun
eyes squinched, peeling nose, water swirling
around her sunburned shoulders, between
her freckled breasts, sometimes over
her choking nostrils.

Breathe in soft, exhale hard.
Feathered with sunlight she keeps
her belly clenched to create hard
muscles. They will be severed some
day soon now.

She envisions a waterlily unfolding
refolding with her breathing. It
glows and drifts, whispers Let me
be your bladder, your right kidney.
Hypnotised, she lifts

each arm overhead, stretch backward. Graceful
water drips from her fingers and
elbows. She smells hot pine resin,
hears a hind leg chorale by sun-drugged cicadas,
forgets the warning

Don't slam your skull on the wall at the
end of the pool.

3. Incantation against listlessness

Be gone, gross toad of lethargy
Depart my weeping pepper tree!

Take your chilly sister Languor
and your puffed-up brother, Anger

Your sticky tongues lap up my mornings
Lick off my words. Now heed my warnings!

I defy your saliva, strong as vodka.
You three shall dance the flat-foot polka.

Care not how hot dark beds may harm,
Leave my cold room. Come where it's warm

Lie here in the night street, thieves, because
It's time to greet oncoming cars.

Lie still, vitality-sapping toads
May you lie pancaked in the road!

4. The Nightingale of Love

I.

Nightingales breed
in our medlar trees
in early spring.
They, migrants, leave
again in August.
We emigrants
have never seen one.
“The birds are very shy,”
we’re told, “but if you know
the nightingales' song,
you often hear their sound.”

We’ve quickly learned
the coo of collared doves
glued in pink pairs
to the feathered branch
of our parasol pine.
We recognize the crack
of white and black magpies
bouncing in the sun,
see the shrill, flapping flocks
of ex-domesticated parakeets
flashing their green tails. But nightingales?
“Go at night” we’re told,
“when the other birds fall silent.”

II.

We slip out at dusk
to the live oak forest
and sit on a fallen log.
Minutes pass. Shadows deepen.
The song comes sudden,
like a shock in the dark,
brave. A tidal wave.
It’s like liquid, stiff with shards of ice,
Melodic, broken by barks.
From the twilight,
Loud answers sound, distant tunes
in different tones, “I’m here.
Come to me.” A paradox: courageous
coloratura from birds in hiding.
The forest throbs with love.
We walk back home holding hands.

III.

In the timeless gardens
of Persian harems,
immured by brilliant, brittle tiles,
in their love slaves' prison,
languid, sloe-eyed concubines
awaits a master's listless call.
Every harem has a medlar,
Where confined in an invincible cage,
also lives a nightingale.

It does not shine like the peacock silks
each captive wears to lure her master's eye.
Why is such a dull brown bird
locked up with beauties?
The slaves know why.
Although caged, they say,
a nightingale does not lose hope,
teaching us night and day
that loneliness can beget marvels, calling
to a mate who never comes.

IV.

In our Vallauris garden, above the sea,
something strange is happening.
When the first warm days arrive,
My new-wed husband opens
our house to the wind,
and then sits down at his brown Pleyel.
Chopin mazurkas fill the air.
His hands dance on the keys.
And every day as he plays,
A nightingale comes.

It sits, invisible, in the twinkling olive tree,
and sings to him, unseen.
Must it hide to feel safe, to dare to be heard?
The nightingale, it seems, has fallen
in love with my husband. It sings, enraptured, long and loud.
When he stops playing, the bird goes away.
But tomorrow when he opens the doors and plays again,
it will return, enthralled, breasting headlong love songs.
Dear nightingale, I understand.
His music is magic. I fell in love with him too.

5. My beloved, snoring

Sleeping Giant rumbles in the bed beside me.
Sleepless, and bored, I declare him a landscape.
Marblehead, Indian Neck,
rising fragrant dunes of ribs,
falling cliff of hip.

His black silhouette blocks an acid day lifting,
hides iron stripes of light coming fast
over Corsica: sulphuric topped with prussic, then Prussian
blue. Wafting Aleppo pine fronds are black lace wavering
brushstrokes on my Deep Valley's shoulder.

Paling light bleaches the weeping pepper.
Sleepy bats do quick flips into their beds.
Time to attempt a distracting caress. His toenails
jerk like a startled chicken-leg. A whole
mountain range wakes. Earthquake

turns into slow roll. Snoring slips into blessing. Silence.
His arm, a warm river, slides gentle beneath
the bridge of my neck, flows onto my hand
and surrounds it. His other, a bower
of willows around me. I could lie here forever.