

FIONA CHAMNESS

Choreography for Ensemble

—for Bob Fosse, Pina Bausch, Nina Simone, and J.

1. Sweet Charity

Your cigarette will never leave your lip
though it dangles on the edge of falling,
caught between the smolder and the slip—
your legwork isn't fucking, but it leads
to fucking, stillness meant to make you beg
the bones to grind, and stop, and groan, and grind
until you've sucked the ashes from your griefs
and stubbed the husks against the railing;
a whole life limned in burnt and broken lines,
the sour heart that went off like a bomb
with years of powder waiting in the keg
almost as though it didn't think you gone;
a molten substance coiled in your core,
the red slick your footprints leave on the floor.

2. Rites of Spring

The red slick your footprints leave on the floor
is paint I've spilled, or let's pretend it is;
I spent so much of high school on the stage
I might not know the difference anymore.
Oh ugly body, up there even now
with no way down. Pina's young dancers writhe;
the girls flinch toward the boys; the cellos rage
and crumple into heaps, not knowing how
to stop. And who does? Not you, gray-haired queen
who taught me my first steps. I mimicked yours.
You told me I was gorgeous, and I tried
to hide how much I needed what you'd seen.
Oh dead man. I remember that first dip,
the sleek pop hidden in your left hip.

3. Cabaret

The sleek pop hidden in your left hip
is all the lust I wished I'd learned to wield;
nine, I kissed a boy on his left shoulder
to stop him jumping off the stairs; thirteen,
my tongue untied, sweeping a girl's mouth clean;
six, my father saying my bare skin
would harm the leather of his chair; older
schoolgirls asking why I wouldn't shave
or wear a bra; my next-to-nothing slips
at parties where the women pulled me in
to look like rebels, then turned boyward, safe,
my softness both a weapon and a shield,
and I went home to finish, like a chore,
left, and leaving hungry: give me more.

4. Pastel Blues

I'm left, and leaving, hungry. Give me more.
Blues has a language for this too. Fishtail
and shuffle, jelly roll and drunken braille.
The needle drops, the record spills its guts.
I sway and lean against the kitchen door,
come here, come here, and press my eyelids shut.
If this is shame, the flooded well of breath
she stirs in me, then give me shame, and play
the thing again. I learned to dance to sounds
like this in basement rooms, in strangers' arms;
we held and left, and held, and spun, and left.
No blues on earth can make the living stay.
But ask me anyway. Lull my dreams dumb
and then some. I want some more and then some

5. More

and then some. I want some more and then some,
then flip the vinyl to the other side,
and this is church, where we pray for the dead.
But my dead are drunk queer lunatics,
my dead slugged vodka, groped and slapped and cried
for Judy Garland, knelt to cock and clit,
so spare me psalms, give me the wine and bread
and blood. Sinnerman, where you gonna run.
Piano acrobats the river down
to dust. I'm through with soloing. Get up
and crush my bones, my friend, teach me the ground;
there's still a film of red left in my cup,
and floor enough to spin, so might as well.
I want a dip so low I can see hell.

6. Café Mueller

I want a dip so low I can see hell
though I'll be blind when I turn back. These chairs,
all over the damn place, nothing to do
but stumble, shove, and stagger toward the wall
only memory can tell us is still there.
A woman trembles as she struggles through
to clamp her arms around the first man's neck.
He holds her tight before the second man
steps in, manipulates their limbs, a lift
they can't maintain, and so she drops, then back
to clutching him, again and then again,
faster and faster, desperate in their grip.
This room's a dark sea. I'm a piece of jetsam.
Hold me for a measure, then for ransom.

7. A Snake in the Grass

Hold me for a measure. Then for ransom
take this dusty footage of a serpent
becoming a bald man in a black hat.
Fosse's last captured performance: dancing
as the Little Prince's snake. A desert
and a thirst, of course, the dry temptation
and dream of death. A budget musical
no one with pride would cop to watching, much
less more than once, but here we are again,
because the body still believes there's such
a thing as going home, a faith as dull
as skin he tries and tries to shed, but can't.
So sting the child, as though you wish him well;
then wind right round the body, sad old shell.

8. Ein Trauerspiel

Wind right round the body. Sad old shell
on a hospital bed at fifty-eight,
a stroke; Fosse was sixty, heart attack;
Pina, sixty-eight, lung cancer; Nina
seventy, and if you try to tell
me about how she never choreographed,
I'll dash your eyes against her fingers, sharp
as they became from leaping on their own.
Too, go ahead and tell me they were straight,
as if that means anything to a corpse.
To be queer is to make your need an art
and try to meet it anyway. The hearse
your dressing room. The streaking lines of makeup
and then the water. Get yourself naked.

9. Run to the Rock

and then the water. Get yourself naked
for once, peel off your fifty layers of cloth
and own up to the cipher left inside.
When they dress your body they won't know
what uniform to give you, you makeshift
carcass, home-repaired cocoon, the moth
that only knew to flutter toward the light
burned out inside your eye's white bulb. A simple
drive: to notice things that blaze, and go.
As if directed on a stage built from the dark,
glare blinds all your lenses and heat crumples
down your armor, leaves your case a charred
black scrawl no one can read, but let it stay.
Say what it was you had to say.

10. Kontakthof

Say what it was you had to say
for breath and growth, the heart as it expands
its catacombs and trailers (then balloons
to bursting? combusts above its basket?)
When the theater is empty, one light stays
for ghosts. I used to climb to the dark room
below the catwalk where the costumes hung
and whisper blessings till the curtain rose;
the cloaks muttered at the floor. Prop casket,
empty as a long-abandoned lung—
and what of that desire, that death suspend
its hold and give me back your obscene jokes?
Queer too, how superstition seemed so dated
before you imploded and turned sacred.

11. All That Jazz

Before you imploded and turned sacred
we flirted in the back of choir practice
as only a young dyke and an old flit
can; I said I'd marry you for your money
and you agreed I would, and then you died
not three days later, lover at your side;
I've told this story twenty times. Service
in the movie theater. A found clip
of you in tap shoes, humble, shuffling, wicked
in brief flashes of eyes and teeth. The choir
director asked your limp expanse, "Am I
supposed to teach the dance myself, buddy?"
You started kicking. Senseless muscles splayed:
the strangest turn your back has ever made.

12. Orpheus und Eurydike

The strangest turn your back has ever made
came in a dream I had before we held
your main memorial. I wandered up
the stairs at a gay bar and found you, no
shock, obviously, except that you had
died. I told you I was afraid I might
forget the dip and how it worked. You smiled
and said you'd teach me again. As you cupped
my back your age reversed. You swept me down,
then back, then said goodbye. The service showed
slides of you as a young man: my blood stilled.
I can't explain what happened, how I'd known
how you would look, but here's as close as truth:
your ghost taught me to dance, taught me to prove.

13. Who's Got the Pain

Your ghost taught me to dance, taught me to prove
these things do happen. I never forgot,
and every time I let my body drop
the weight's a conversation with the void:
hello loves, I'm still thinking about skin;
how do you fare without it? How's it feel
now everything that is can be your clothes?
Are you the shoe that fucks the ground, the sun
licking the steel, kiss of the chalky pill
against my throat each morning, the barbed voice
that murders me against my speakers, groove
as deep as grave, to keep me living? Those
are the ghosts we need, their tender shove;
pain's the only place where we can move.

14. The Red Shoes

Pain's the only place where we can move
as though we mean it. Pleasure is that too,
of course, a sea of vast and deep allowance
laced with teeth. Blood is as blood does. Ghosts
are as ghosts did. These are the steps. Come now
and learn them over. Remember the girl
whose shoes forced her to dance until she died
and begged an angel for forgiveness? Be
too proud to beg. Move faster than the tide
that slices at your ankles as it grows,
your spine the long horizon's swooning curve
behind which there is nothing we can see.
Smoke in a bottle, tossed against the ship;
your cigarette will never leave your lip.

15. Ensemble

Your cigarette will never leave your lip.
The red slick your footprints leave on the floor
and the sleek pop, hidden in your left hip,
left and leaving, hungry. Give me more
and then some. I want some more and then some.
I want a dip so low I can see hell.
Hold me for a measure, then for ransom;
wind right round the body, sad old shell,
and then the water, get yourself naked,
say what it was you had to say
before you imploded and turned sacred,
the strangest turn your back has ever made—
your ghost taught me to dance, taught me to prove
pain's the only place where we can move.