

**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.