

Five Poems of Desire and Doom

by [Cristina Nehring](#) (September 2023)



Woman on the Stairs, No. 2, Jane Dickson, 1984

Stairs to a Studio in the Marais

I need no light.
My soles are thin.
The night groans,
And I am shocked
At my intimacy with wood.

My feet, like fingers,
Trace its curves,
Know its knots,
And dips, and tip
Into its crevices, sweetly

My step is sure
As I wind into darkness;
My heart were light,
Did I not know
I was betraying you.

It is not this rotting
Wood whose curves
I wished to have
By heart one day,
But yours.

Chez le Pharmacien

Hello, Monsieur Lin.
It's been some time.
Forgive me.

I live nearby, I know,
And you've always been a friend.

This girl at my side,
In any case, is Tess.
She's almost two.
I did not bring her by before,
Since she was born
With Down Syndrome.
It's not easy to spot,
But you would have read
The prescriptions.
And you had so
Looked forward
To the birth.

If I've not come in
While she was growing,
I'm here today
Because she is dying.

I wanted you to meet her, Mr. Lin,
Before medicine scrawls its autograph
Across her cheek,
Before the alchemy of cancer
Disfigures her.

I wanted to tell you,
That I love her more than
All those to whom I feared to show her,
More than the country I adopted,
And the world I left behind,
More, excuse me, than breath.

She has become my secret
Wealth, enclosed in my chest
Since the world held her cheap.
I fell for her the day she smiled

Like Sleeping Beauty
From her glass box in the ICU.
They already knew
That day, some hours into life,
She had leukemia,
The introductory, transient kind,
Which would become,
As she grew up,
The kind that came to stay
And slay.

Two Christmases have still not passed.
She can't yet walk.
Where she must go,
I take her.

We've phoned to Portugal
And made arrangements.
They sell trips there we can't book here.

So that is all, Mr. Lin.
I thank you for the time you said
To carry the child to term
Even when her father left.
She has become,
As you foresaw,
Improbably beautiful.

Wave goodbye now,
Love. Your eyes shine
With the jewels
Of the Underworld.
You will light the way for me,
And I shall walk for two.

You Are the Unacknowledged

Core
Of my life.
Both of us
Are emperors of
Economy.
The kings
Not of caramels
And cream
But of bleached
Bones
And unsated

Desire.
We converse
In the language of
Absence.
Pauses
Prove our
Favorite part
Of speech,
Blanks.
The skipped
Salutation, the

Omitted
Endearment,
The missed
Meeting.
We eat
Each other's
Chastity.
We are gluttons
Of each other's
Scarceness.
We join

At the hole
In our heart.

Words

*Maria aber behielt alle diese Worte und bewegte sie in
ihrem Herzen.—Luke 2:19,*

I move your words around my soul at night,
And wake with them in my veins.
Yesterday's alphabet is today's anatomy,
The dawn's red pulse,
The scarlet in my throat.

Your shyness surges through my blood
Like boldness; no one
But us knows the value of restraint
The poison—simple, mortal, pure—
Of excellent intentions.

Nothing so safe as an affair.
None but a saint could startle
Us so, no god but Yahweh.
Yet he is a tyrant.
He gathers all to him,

Both flesh and wood.
He overturns tables.
He starts as a word but ends as a deed.
He impregnates virgins,
And makes all virginal.

Last Words of an Adulteress

In 1274, a young woman by the name of Kate Armand was burnt at the stake in London. She was rumored to love her parish priest. Her crime was prostitution.

The heart is wider
Than they say, she said,
And stepped onto the platform.
It is not true
That one love casts another out
As one nail drives another nail.

Each time I love a man,
It is a shadow play, oh Father,
For the love I want to make with you.
Not pollution but a prophecy,
Not dilution but a draft.

I cannot feel a palm on my skin
Or the brush of the straw
Behind me, or a breeze
Without feeling your caress.
Every lover is you.

Since you cannot surround me with your touch
The wind itself must play your part
Tousling my hair and tearing at my skirts,
Raising me to your face,
And rousing my slumbering need.

Since you cannot invade me with your life

The sea itself has played your part
Rushing to fill my every pore
To gather me in its dizzy swirl,
To bear me up in white.

And since you will not grasp me in your arms
The flames themselves will lick my limbs
Must take my soul, all clean, across the continents
To your soul,
Waiting,
In the smokeless still.

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Cristina Nehring is publishing *The Child Who Never Spoke: 23 1/2 Lessons in Fragility* with Heliotrope Books on October 24, 2023. She is the author of *A Vindication of Love: Reinventing Romance for the 21st Century* which was reviewed glowingly on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*. She writes regularly for the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and many other publications. She lives in Paris with her daughter.

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