

# 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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