

Catherine Chandler

Good-bye Song

*Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?*

— Robert Frost, from “Reluctance”

i.

This year I thought I knew where to begin —
with autumn’s bow to the encroaching night,
the fade, the giving way, the giving in,
the ripeness turned to rot. I thought I might

go further still, and pledge allegiance to
the incandescence of a dying sun,
and sport my newfound skill to shrug on cue
as leaves dropped from their branches, one by one.

I’d welcome winter with an open mind
and love it with an open hand. I’d show
the whole world (and myself) how I’m resigned
to the hypothesis of letting go.

For one who’s known the lyrics all along,
the time had come to sing the good-bye song.

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ii.

The time has come to write a good-bye song;
and if it must be sad, one can't go wrong

with universal *I remember whens*;
with *au revoirs* and *till we meet agains*;

where tracks of tears and unchained melodies,
like mawkish Sonnets from the Portuguese,

will either move the hardest heart of stone
or else give rise to a collective groan.

But I will not resort to songs sung blue
when bidding fare-thee-well. So, here's to you,

the blessing and the burden and the bane
of my existence. Let the song explain

in every minor key and shade of black,
the self-destructive art of doubling back.

iii.

The self-destructive art of doubling back —
 that catchy riff or classical refrain —
 can conjure repetends that come and go
and either lead you down a cul-de-sac
 or offer up an anodyne to pain,
 blunting the edges of the status quo.

As when, not long ago, I overheard
 an old-time ballad, *Rhythm of the Rain*
 drifting from a neighbor's radio —
I knew my song depended on a word.
 Yes. No.

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iv.

Yes or no. The mind. The heart. It's time —
long overdue, in fact — to sing good-bye
to reconsolidated neurons I'm
obsessing over.

But the gadfly, *Why*,

flits in, as recollections multiply —
the hazel eyes ... the B-flat clarinet ...
Ich liebe dich ... the 2nd of July ...
until what started as a minuet

becomes a mosher's slam dance; the duet
becomes a duel, and neither wins the day.
Heart calls up *Romeo and Juliet*.
Mind wants to zap them both away.

Bob Dylan got it right, and I admit
I'm tangled up in blue. I want to quit.

v.

I'm tangled up in blue. I want to quit —
give up, back out, back off — but I'm intent
on finishing this vain experiment.
I'll write the song. I pledge to recommit
my waking hours to wordplay and to wit,
avoiding pathos, bathos and lament,
and take great care I don't misrepresent
the facts. This song will be my Greatest Hit!

I search for inspiration in Millay:
Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink ...
I brainstorm with the Bard, whose words ring true:
Let thy fair wisdom, not thy passion, sway ...
Too OTT. I tailor Humperdinck:
I don't know how to [sing] good-bye [to you].

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vi.

I don't know how I'd sing good-bye to you
without a note of censure or regret;
I'd have a tendency to overdo

the wretchedness I can't seem to forget;
I'd botch the score with tremolo or trill,
and la-di-dah about the night we met.

But on the flip side, if mere words could kill,
I'd make it clear that, though you were my first
and dearest love, I did survive you. Still,

if both the roles we played could be reversed,
and I had dropped you, as you dropped me then,
you'd know, because when something is the worst —

say, like eleven on a scale of ten —
then nothing's ever quite so bad again.

vii.

Nothing has been quite so bad again,
nor quite as good, and never quite the same.
I thought it would be effortless to write

a song whose coda is a firm *Amen*;
an exposé on how I've come to claim
the qualities of slow-burn anthracite.

But, as you see, I've failed. The staves are bare.
The metaphors break down from wear and tear.

I based my premise for the good-bye song
on fuzzy logic and on shaky ground.
It isn't right, but neither is it wrong.

Perhaps next year the heart will come around
and hand the mind an uncontested win.
Next year, perhaps, I'll know where to begin.