

The Chorus Opens the Way

Muses, drudges, washerwomen, whores, house workers, factory girls, waitresses, and aspiring but never-to-be stars make up this company, gather in the circle and fall into the line where all particularity and distinction fade away. One girl can stand in for any of them, can serve as the placeholder for the story, recount the history from the beginning, convey the knowledge of freedom disguised as jargon and nonsense. Few understand them, study them like they are worth something, realize their inherent value. If you listen closely, you can hear the whole world in a bent note, a throwaway lyric, a singular thread of the collective utterance. Everything from the first ship to the young woman found hanging in her cell. Marvel at their capacity to inhabit every woman's grief as their own. All the stories ever told rush from her opened mouth. A tome of philosophy in a moan. In the deepest darkest recess of an opaque song, it is clear that life is at stake.

She is an average chorine, just one of the girls, nobody special, part of the assembly, engulfed in the crowd, lost in the company of minor figures. The songs like her are an enigma, obscure and full of meaning, vital and *so old and raw*, like those voices echoing through the airshaft of the building or the stories of loss and betrayal bel-

lowed from a second-story window, or the pleas whispered in a back alley: *Baby, let me come back home*. In unison, the voices give form to the tragedy:

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home, a long way from home.*

*I saw my husband lying dead,
They took me over the sea*

*Love is like a faucet that turns off and on.
The very time you think you got it
It's turned off and gone.*

*Blues, please tell me do I have to die a slave?
Blues, please tell me do I have to die a slave?
Do you hear me pleading, you going to take me to my grave.*

The song lines, the riotous refrains, the street-corner compositions are hard to explain or reduce to one thing, like a maternal song that makes you and marks you, yet is untranslatable. *Do bana cobe, gene, gene me!* The story exceeds the words, the verses. All the things secreted, harbored deep inside are felt and exclaimed. It is all so terrible and so beautiful. The weight of all that has happened is palpable, the immensity of hurt and betrayal, articulated in the rhythm of the line, conveyed in the length of breath. Living is not to be taken for granted. If you are able to bear the burden of what they have to bring, then there is a place for you inside the circle and what you have suffered is part of this inventory. The war, theft, rout, rape, and plunder are lodged in every line.

If you dare to listen and watch, or shout, "Speak—Tell it now," or clap your hands, you're in it and there's no escape. Now it is impossible to turn your back, to carry on like the world is the same. Don't

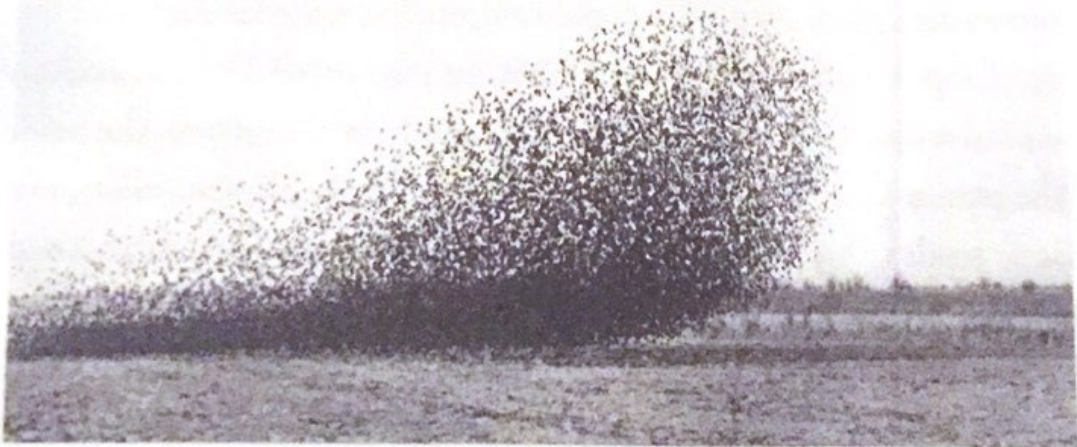
waste a breath asking why she has to hold everything the rest can't bear, like you don't know, like you supposed things were some other way, like there was some gift other than what she offered in her outstretched hands; don't dare ask, you're in no position nor is anyone else except the ones with the crumpled paper bags stuffed with work clothes, or the kitchen conscripts, or the Middle Alley whores, or the fast girls acting like fools in the club and moving like angels on the stage, or girls trapped in an attic or raped in a coal bin, or women, bent over tubs, scrubbing and washing for the whole city, or sleeping in the room off the kitchen so they can raise the children and tend to the husbands and ensure the *future increase* of the world set against them. The chorus makes a plan, they draft a blueprint: move, escape, rush to the city, quit the job and run away from everything hell-bent on sucking all the life out of them. A moment of reprieve. Then trapped somewhere else, in a different city, a new place, a stranger's house, the boss's bedroom. No one else imagines anything better. So it is left to them to envision things otherwise; as exhausted as they are, they don't relent, they try to make a way out of no way, to not be defeated by defeat.

Who else would dare believe another world was possible, spend the good days readying for it, and the bad days shedding tears that it has not yet arrived? Who else would be reckless enough to dream a colored girl's or a black woman's future? Devote even an afternoon musing about the history of the universe seen from nowhere? Or be convinced that nothing could be said about the Negro problem, modernity, global capitalism, police brutality, state killings, and the Anthropocene if it did not take her into account? Did not reckon with the disavowed geography of the world: the barracoon, the hold, the plantation, the camp, the reservation, the garret, the colony, the attic studio, the bedroom, the urban archipelagoes, the ghetto, and the prison?

The chorus bears all of it for us. The Greek etymology of the word *chorus* refers to *dance within an enclosure*. What better articulates the

long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion than the acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure? The chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise. *Somewhere down the line the numbers increase, the tribe increases. The chorus increases. So how do you keep on? She can't help it. . . . The struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on.*

All of the details of the nothing special and the extraordinary brutality cohere to produce a picture of the world in all its beauty and death. In the whimsical girlish tones, in the loud laughter and the back-and-forth exchange of the hallway, in the girls dancing in the stairwell is a will to unsettle, destroy, and remake that is so forceful



it takes the breath away, so palpable it makes you reel with pain. To fall in step with the chorus is to do more than shake your ass and hum the melody, or repeat the few lines of the bit part handed over like a gift from the historian, as if to say, See, the girl can speak, or to be grateful that the sociologist has taken a second look and recognizes the working out of “revolutionary ideals” in an ordinary black woman’s life. Guessing at the world and seizing at chance, she eludes the law and transforms the terms of the possible.

The bodies are in motion. The gestures disclose what is at stake—the matter of life returns as an open question. The collective movement points toward what awaits us, what has yet to come into view, what they anticipate—the time and place better than here; a glimpse of the earth not owned by anyone. So everything depends on them and not the hero occupying center stage, preening and sovereign. Inside the circle it is clear that every song is really the same song, but crooned in infinite variety, every story altered and unchanging: *How can I live? I want to be free. Hold on.*