

## 2 R o s a l i n d F r a n k l i n

*Playing me, the very small, from a score ...*

A day before my night-train back to Paris  
a Belgian, our guide and I took on the trail  
up-valley from *Pralognan de la Vanoise*,  
across the bridge of *Doron de Chavière*,  
to ford the *Lac des Vaches*, lightning left and right  
stop-motioned the roiling turbulence of clouds,  
and we passed *Lac Long* to *Félix Faure*, a hut  
stone-faced, three-storied, where climbers supped and slept  
below *Grande Casse*, the highest of the massif,  
which woke us at three a.m. to take the peak,  
lifting a lantern that lit us up the slope,  
and I more than kept up with the breathing men  
but scrambled up the moraine and over scree  
to where a reddening pre-dawn tongues the sky,  
and mounting the glacier of *Grand Couloirs*  
as crampons gripped a columned steep that rose  
abrupt, I overtook the snow-packed bergschrund  
for the lean, the stony whitenecked hogback gate  
to a tighter snow-ridge trudging summit-ward  
and then I walked above twelve thousand feet  
where the upthrow of the big break finishes  
and the only roof was omnipresent light

and I'm in the gods before my glacier,  
*de Rosolin*, below, and the Matterhorn,  
 Mount Blanc, *Gran Paradiso*, a mountain range  
 to the horizon, east to west, north and south,  
 erected at the Alpine orogeny  
 when late Mesozoic plates of Africa  
 and India collided with Eurasia,  
 and I sat and ate a climber's meal that had  
 no name, a slim and muscular, black-haired  
 instrument of filtrated will, an erstwhile girl  
 who held the sun to a dead heat at the top.

Riverside along the *Isle de la Cité*  
 across the Seine to *douze*, *Quai Henri IV*,  
 a greyish concrete block that flanked *La Rive Droite*,  
 I outpaced rush-hour cyclists immobilized  
 by a brouhaha of cars and routiers  
 paralyzed like silvered family photographs  
 which hang on stairwell walls, or carbon crystals  
 fixed in a tube that an oil and mercury  
 diffusion pump evacuates, on the way  
 to the lab of my desire, mechanics' hall  
 and little cottage hub, making numeric  
 alchemy with hot blind irises, peering  
 deeper than I'd ever seen before, they were  
 his eyes, Monsieur Jacques, we his kneeling pupils,  
 me a decent second who, graduating,  
 got a gift of coal crystallized by pressure  
 and time for as many as four billion years,  
 a flower that he taught me how to open,

blowing fluorescent copper x-ray runnels  
 through the stamen molecules to pollenate  
 a camera plate in diffracted grey scale  
 conundra begging for a transformation  
 that a clever Paulina like me could do.

I lived in Rachel's body when Jacques had her  
 on the Calvi ferry from the *Côte d'Azur*,  
 awake and sleeping-bagged at their cabin door  
 on a deck that rose and fell beneath my skirt  
 with the waters of the *Mer Ligurienne*,  
 anticipating the long beach nightclub life  
 and dancing shoeless, bare-legged, unbuttoning,  
 a lab of coats turned motley charivari  
 until an intimate exhaustion sank us  
 in the late night yielding sands of Corsica,  
 forgot the one-bath *Rue Garancière*,  
 postwar rations, and leather soles just once  
 a year, we were the pretty glitterati  
*à la bonne heure*, I was the Franklin sequence,  
 34, 27, and 38,  
 a flow-state baked-Alaska after-dinner  
 virgin come of timeworn English jewelry stock  
 who'd be his own *Madonna di a Serra*  
 if he had the mind to teach me as I am,  
 a woman with rights to science like a man.

It's only high-energy short-wave-length light,  
 Vittorio, why say  $x$  if we know it?  
 an electron, butted by a particle,

jumps into its atom's lower orbital  
 where it vents a photon, the unneeded heat  
 that got it there, and what's the mystery there?  
 yes, it's excited, yes, it's ionizing,  
 but science must explain the life we're living,  
 not enigmatize Bragg's crystallography  
 or intolerably befuddle eye-light,  
 accelerated and curtailed, with x-ray  
 vision from the funny papers that assert  
 an *übermensch*.

X, unlettered signature  
 that marks unforeseen and lethal side effects.

Weaklings who couldn't get or keep their women  
 peed on the door-jambes of my lab, then knockless  
 just walked in, Maurice with averted eyes, and Jim  
 who told me what I should and shouldn't study,  
 that I couldn't understand my photographs,  
 as if I served their vain imaginations  
 and KCL a Cambridge old-boys hangout,  
 so I marched Jim backwards out the corridor  
 into the vacant arms of wheedler Wilkins,  
 and behind those ectomorphs shut fast the door  
 to cocoon me with my specimens for days  
 when my hand-me-down fine-focus Ehrenberg  
 beamed them hotly in the tilting cradle  
 to diffract onto the micro-camera  
 platelet and cut it with a subatomic  
 scalpel we stabilized from thumps and tremblors  
 in a scaffold jerry-built by Ray and me

and tested in the full photonic torrent,  
 Ray securing apparatus while I and  
 the fiber-cradle bathed in x-rays outflux  
 while calibrating angular exposures,  
 this a long time cooking, unrelenting hours,  
 and then encased the sampled dna  
 inside a chemical hydration chamber  
 so that pictures came in dry or wet, the des-  
 iccated were compact, uncertain strands,  
 but the saturated, helical and sharp,  
 their outer hydrophilic phosphate backbones  
 elongating in the water where they soaked.

*the switch-slips in my SA node  
 wait a count of twelve to beat  
 as if to hibernate  
 should the ice sheets come again –  
 eccentricities  
 of instrumentation,  
 a seat among the second violins  
 adding odd vibrato  
 to a solemn Roman march:  
 what will do me in  
 is an error I should live with*

Was I a hellion in black to them?  
 When KCL had entrained from London Strand  
 to the Cavendish at Cambridge on our knees  
 to appreciate its dna contraption,  
 Jim boy, all teeth and legs, sized me up like steak,

thought better going elsewhere for a girly,  
 and with Crick unveiled their freak three helices  
 slung outwards from a backbone down the centre  
 as if hydrophilia did not exist,  
 an elemental blunder briskly skewered  
 by my female second-class in chemistry  
 so that Bragg's understudied prentices would  
 have to spend their time on what they'd said they'd do,  
 not meddle with my own remit: experiments  
 revealing quantities dictating theory;  
 let the modelers get numbers on their own  
 or wait until I publish mine.

They got it:

and right the second time, it was beautiful,  
 precise, and elegant, a double helix  
 deftly coupling A with T, and C with G,  
 lucky Jim's extrapolation, radiant  
 with simplicity, realized by numbers  
 my experiments had proved, luminating  
 how chemistry makes sheer lifelessness alive,  
 a bedtime story I can tell my father  
 when he lectures me about creator Gods  
 and subservience to dogma.

Time to go:

*Nature* put my paper, the heavy lifter  
 of the three, the last, murkily acknowledged  
 by that pair of Cavendish adventurers  
 who backchanneled into everything I'd done  
 thanks to the loose-lipped, pocket-picking snitches  
 from whose fingers my ready acquiescence

to a smothered herstory could liberate  
me in a laboratory of my own,  
enfranchised from a chronic self-promoter  
and creepy operator who used condoms  
to make equipment fixes in basement digs  
as squalid as the gaping blitz-bombed crater  
they adjoined, for whom KCL commanded  
a short and godless Ashkenazim female  
who took her thankless leave without permission  
must desist from further dna research  
to expiate the manumission quitclaim  
she required of them, but what the cronies gave,  
my right to answerable experiment,  
was a warrant, dated, unrescindable,  
to analyze the universal Ångström  
whirligig that seems so solid underfoot:  
a bargain satisfactory on my part.

Birkbeck College and Bernal the mage gave me  
the mosaic virus of tobacco leaf  
proved helicoid by Jim before he dumped it  
chasing dna, unable to locate  
the virus rna, his comeuppance paid  
when I found its inert nucleic acid  
twisted round inside a protein cylinder  
like diamond thread that's wound within a bobbin,  
and from my images I built a model  
with specs extrapolated from their numbers  
and solved what Jim could not, how once the virus  
screwed into a cell it shed proteic armor,

unfurled, and manufactured cancer engines,  
 his claim the heart of life, mine its cardiac  
 arrest: and we gave and got a *quid pro quo*.  
 Ours were fighting words exchanged on speaking terms,  
 and I proved as good at theory as he was.

Jim kept on turning up, at Woods Hole in the throes  
 of Christa and a hurricane, inviting  
 me to drive with him to California,  
 in Pasadena dining with the Paulings,  
 then in London to proffer tips for funding  
 where none was needed, sending Don my way  
 who was so fond of me, I might have loved him  
 had I by then a body made for loving –  
 Jacques I couldn't have, I didn't want Bernal,  
 too impressionable their wives and popsies –  
 but from the start Don was mine to spurn or take,  
 my America so classless, young, and fun,  
 and when I died was it all too much for Jim  
 that he'd never get to lie on top of me,  
 impregnate her who inseminated him  
 with a child of such mortifying fury  
 that it took a decade to parturiate,  
 and when book-delivered in the shriving pew  
 of molecular biology it failed  
 to exorcise unpaid indebtedness  
 and tame frustrated indignation at  
 the Willesden Jewish Cemetery dybbuk  
 eight years his senior with whom so many  
 asterisked his agonized entitlements.

P R I M A L T E S T A M E N T

Telomer- Ase re-  
Tails the dn- A to  
Cleave the Germ, to  
Clone its muta- Gens, liber-  
Ating Toxins,  
Aborting Tocsins,  
Cycling from G-zero phase to the  
G-one Checkpoint that it may re-  
Tool the Acid  
Genes to Amplify and propa-  
Gate the Cells in  
Guggling Carcinoid  
Tumors Assailing her  
Ana- Tomy as if a  
Great Cresting  
Sea- Gait  
Trucked Amuck,  
A- Ttacked a  
Tanker Anchored off an  
A- Toll, dis-  
Gorged its Crude and dog-  
Ged Code to  
Grope and Crab, en-  
Gulf and Clutch,  
Glut Chockablock,  
Cram and Gape,  
Apollyon of Tissue, un-  
Aging Teeth.

Jim has scaled Mount Whitney's peak for Christa's sake,

I for sunrise on the High Sierra crest  
 stopped short at midway, three thousand feet below  
 the summit a healthy 36-year-old  
 could have reached, then jack-knifed midriff pain  
 buckled me in Berkeley, and torso swelling  
 in New York outsized me for the skirts I wore,  
 as if impossibly with child, not tumors  
 of the ovaries: truculent, their cancers  
 compromised the uterus, all had to go,  
 and went, until a mass grew on my pelvis  
 wall, and cobalt chemotherapy began  
 that did no harm, I took off more weight again  
 and yet couldn't climb the Birkbeck stairs so well,  
 in and out of Royal Marsden Hospital  
 and in, at last, where I was reassuring  
 everyone about remission as I shrank,  
 and in the street Jacques cried uncontrollably,  
 no one said a word about the obvious,  
 that with morphine I was delirious  
 until I fell asleep.

All my testament  
 is photo fifty-one.

There's no afterlife  
 or God for me, quickly here and then no more,  
 gone with the alpine dawn and midnight beaches,  
 the days and night of trees that shade slate walkway  
 slabs which pave my under-window Thistle Grove,  
 gone the cells that knew their place, contributing  
 a fractional identity to the whole,  
 not cold-quitting unless they had permission,

P R I M A L   T E S T A M E N T

never giving up when body's shutting down  
to heed a call to urgent disassembly  
but collaborating agent in it all.

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