

## Reginald D. Patterson

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Soaring on Regenerated Wings in Myriam Chancy's *The Loneliness of Angels* (Peepal Tree Press, 2010). 372 pp.

In the conclusion of Myriam Chancy's *The Loneliness of Angels* and after her own personalized 'season in Haiti,' Catherine, a *virtuoso* of Frederic Chopin (1810-1849), resolves that there are only more questions and that there is still little to be known regarding the facts of life and death as they pertain to the navigation between the physical and spiritual realms of human existence. In a flux of 1980's flashbacks to Haiti, during her stay in the *Marais*, the historic Jewish neighborhood in Paris, France on March 10th, 2004, Catherine narrates intimately to the reader her first arrival in Haiti from Canada to reside with her Tatie Ruth as "greet[ing] her native land with rage" (81). The only character with a first-person narrative voice, Catherine actively remembers her first years and how while playing Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, and others, she eventually learned to particularly appreciate Chopin, "both for his famed frailty and for his temerity of heart" (82). As a child she remembers practicing as the piano shook the framed pictures off the top of the small upright piano whose strings' tremors were akin to "ropes attached to the valves of [her] heart, opening and closing them against [her] will, as if [she were] a marionette." Catherine later explains that "the music cleansed [her] soul and readied [her] for new life at a time when [she] had no reason to believe that there could be one, when, indeed, [she] did not want to go on" (82). On March 18th, 2004, eight days after that memory and shortly after attending the funeral of Tatie Ruth, a *fam m'vayant*, Catherine relocates her new self upon her return to the *Marais* in the form of a *coda*<sup>1</sup>,

This is all I know:

There are no answers.

Only: is and is.

Still, the questions haunt me like a dirge:

*What strength had Canaan to withstand his father's curse? What witness of suffering caused Noah to betray? What nature of whim led forces of*

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<sup>1</sup> Italian for "tail," the coda is a formal section in a musical composition, which formally and structurally brings the piece to a closure though an expanded cadence. This cadence or "falling" can be heard as the final condensed musical reiteration of the anterior musical themes.

*nature to conspire the oceans to overflow their beds, wiping out the believers, while the doubters watched on, untouched? What beasts of burden lurk beneath the earth's crust in wait as we go on denying visions and prophecies, the gifts of our forebears? What humility before the scarred world can the gods admit, to allow the angels, at last in their loneliness, to sing?* (347)

Starting on February 28th, 2004 in Port-au-Prince Hills in Haiti with Tatie Ruth at her “memory table” and three days after the 2004 Haitian Rebellion, *The Loneliness of Angels* is historicized against the immediate outcome in the republic following prison breaks and the dashing *coup d'état* on the Former President of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. While national demagogues are placed aside, Chancy instead charts the past, present and future as if astronomy, of the banal lives of seemingly normal everyday people, or “walkers” throughout their ancestral connections in the labyrinth of their lives. Chancy’s labyrinth, described as the “structure” of the novel by the author, is not only one of visual navigation, but one of aural and oral navigation through song and darkness. Interspersing the text with rich intertextual references to Old Testament stories and Greek mythology, Chancy reinforces the depth of her characters’ shared and lived experiences through the layered meta-narratives of *Noah* and *Job* (the most famous faithful of the bereaved and mourning) and *The Chute of Icarus*.

While not directly analyzed in LOA, the Curse of Ham is the keystone biblical justification of slavery and of anti-black racism throughout history. Chancy’s primary character, Catherine, is at a loss in her exegesis of Noah and his cursing Canaan, son of Ham.<sup>2</sup> In her recounting of Noah in *Genesis* 7:1-29, Catherine exclaims, “[t]he truth is Noah didn’t know he would survive. After the flood, he got drunk, stripped naked and embarrassed his youngest son, Canaan, his grandson really . . .” While critical of Noah’s possible loss of faith, Catherine still remains empathetic, conceding: “[t]his must have been the only way Noah could tell he was still alive . . . [t]hat kind of destruction gnaws away at part of your soul and then takes up residence in the hole it’s eaten . . .” In sum, she describes Noah as “the world’s first alcoholic” and “God-sanctioned precursor” for her own mother’s addictions due to the fact that his “only thought” upon arrival “was to plant the first vine and make himself some wine so that he could get completely stone drunk.” Here, Catherine lays out a radical, more forgiving narrative for Noah’s grandson, who just happened to see his grandfather erasing the memories of his having charted the “dark seas as all living things died around him, while the whole earth seemed to rot from the inside out, dreaming of that day when he wouldn’t have to be responsible for all remaining things on earth, when he could literally lose his mind” (90). Catherine wants to know “[w]hat strength had Canaan to withstand his father’s curse rooting in such suffering” (347)?

It is in Winter of 1973 in Canada (in Catherine’s flashback) that Rose, Catherine’s mother, shares her conclusions of the “The Fall of Icarus” and his sun-melted waxen woven wings made by his father Daedalus, concluding: “*Icarus is in heaven . . . not to be too clever . . . [t]here nothing wrong with a grounded bird,*” and finally reminding her daughter Catherine that “*heaven is a place*” (190-2). Starting in 1956 and continuing throughout the rise of President

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<sup>2</sup> For a review of the philosophical debates throughout antiquity and into the Enlightenment, see Louis Sala-Molins, *Le Code noir, ou, Le calvaire de Canaan*, Pratiques Théoriques (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987).