Dancing at the Chelsea

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Two Poems · Dionisio D. Martínez

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It is no longer a question of balance and yet we dance to keep from falling.

We dance because the rough surface of the moon has carved a hole in the dark.

We dance on the beams of our unfinished houses. We were dancing when our real houses vanished and our lives became this.

We dance because this thin European found a piano in the hall and dragged it into his room and we had to celebrate the way he dragged it in by himself and the way he hacked at the keys like mad.

We are still dancing, still celebrating. We dance with the ghost of Sid Vicious in the elevator. We were dancing before the murder.

We were dancing in the lobby when we heard something and we all felt a sharp pain and we thought it was only our tired and reluctant muscles giving up on our bodies. Now we dance for the limousine driver and his family,
we dance for the genius, for the man
with a hole in his head, for the one who has
lived here forever.
We dance for every song ever
written about these rooms.
We dance full of vertigo looking
down from any window above 23rd Street,
we let ourselves
go like scarves in a confused wind.
We will be dancing after the man with
the hole in his head has burned
perfect circles through the soles of his shoes.
We will dance on the broken bones
of our feet. We think
we can go on even as ghosts, as angels looking
down at the blessings of 23rd Street.

We climbed the stairs dancing
the night of the blackout when the elevator
stopped. This was long before the ghost.
We still dance when we climb
and descend the stairs. We still
use the stairs because we like the romance of it.

We've danced through every modern war.
We dance
each night after the last club has closed down
like a war no one knows how to end and all

that remains is a scratched record and someone
humming and the inevitable piano

and all the lost angels in the halls.
We will be dancing when the last

angel cuts his own wings off and tosses them
up at the moon and jumps like another

blessing from any window above 23rd Street.
We dance in spite of gravity and the failure

of perpetual motion, in spite of the sleepless
angels of mathematics.

We dance the dance of those who speak
in tongues.

We dance like the shadows
of puppets in someone’s clumsy hands. Sometimes

we dance with our own clumsy shadows.
We dance to keep from falling in love with

the lives of the strangers we
picked when the lights went out. Some

of us lit candles. Remember? But this
was after the fact. In the dark

we had changed partners and now
we found ourselves clinging to strange
new lives. We knew
that it would be like this from here on.

We would dance
and dance, hoping that through friction
or obsolescence or possibly even perfect
balance we would rid ourselves
of these lives. This, at least,
was the hope that kept us dancing.

The truth was something else. We knew
that we would change partners again
and again like bums trading stolen
goods by the light of the small fire they've
made in the aisle of an abandoned Pullman.

A Catholic Education

Cross yourself before you go to sleep. Sleep
with your empty hands on your heart.
Keep your empty hands open. Tear your heart
out with your prayers. Tear the sheets.
Stare at the little shadows on the ceiling.
Don't stare at the little shadows on the ceiling.
Don't imagine anything walking out
of the little shadows in your sleep. Don't
touch anything. Keep your empty hands
clean. Keep your clean hands on your heart.
You have learned how to rise by now, haven't you?