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The Skate

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NANCY VIEIRA COUTO

The Skate

The Skate

Crossing the Delaware
Christmas, 1838

What she has gotten herself into is a boat full of women terrified of shimmying over the wrong state of the right element, the sailors who will push them half enjoying the crush of flounces, the loosely corseted hysteria, as they surround the craft and bump it off the ice-caked Jersey bank and skate it on its keel across the frozen surface, whose pocks and fissures and upthrusts simulate, at first,

the chaos of a storm at sea, the small boat tossed and jerked over the sill of panic, the ladies unlacing swells of vowels as they near the pure, stilled middle. They are skating

on glass, they are skating on nothing more solid than the shimmer of their own inexpressible longings, gliding at the speed of pure pleasure, all the petals of the compass blown and gone, gravity gone,

gone from the counted cross-stitch of their souls, and they are skating, and they are suddenly shy with one another, widows, wives, and virgins averting dreamy gazes, geranium cheeks, curly wisps escaping
from under hoods and bonnets, and she, most of all, is shy as she skates the unconfessed glissades of her insatiable desire. There is only this skate of a boat in motion, and motion, and the physicality of motion, this space for it, this current gone glaze separating “here” from here. Meanwhile, the gentlemen are hoofing it. Such a vaudeville of tentative thrusts with sticks and umbrellas, such steps, missteps, and dust-me-ups! At last safe on land, they muster wagons and make their way by Front Street, the ladies squared as boxes and as mum as if nothing had happened.