

Dance Lessons

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Creative essays have taken the shapes of their subjects for years and at the hands of numerous writers, imitating space and the structures of other documents. In my readings, however, I had not found essays that focused on the art of dance. The essays in *Dance Lessons* are personal experiments with the forms of individual dances, while using those some dance patterns as catalysts for explorations of my experiences with trauma and mental illness. My extensive work on both essays has contributed to my growth as an essayist, and I hope to submit both for publication at some point in the future.

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I would like to thank Lucas and Michele for their willingness to be present in all of my work.

Process Statement

Both essays in my project “Dance Lessons” are meant to reach toward difficult personal questions in a style that is radically honest without bluntness. I chose the personal essay because I wanted to explore segments of my own individual growth through trauma and mental illness, with little engagement with the broader landscape of research and experiences in those areas. For better or for worse, my trauma and mental illness are experiences I had alone, and I wanted to respect the unique perspectives I brought to each. The personal essay has given me room to lean into and expose areas of truth that would not otherwise be accessible to others. I wanted to write about the most difficult experiences I have had in combination with the complicated but overwhelmingly positive dances and dance community that has helped me to work through my struggles. It was important to me to include both sides so as not to make demands of the reader’s emotional energy; I don’t want to make a reader feel they must feel sorry for me, or otherwise ask anything beyond an open mind.

It would have been relatively simple to write traditionally-organized essays stating the specific events that hurt me and then the specific dance experiences that helped ease that hurt, but I wanted instead to work with experimental forms, something between Brenda Miller’s “hermit crab” essay that takes the shape of another type of writing (a menu, film script, instruction manual) (Miller and Paola 111-113) and Eileen Pollock’s spatial or found forms, which mimic their subject matter in their structure (Pollock 295-298). The art of dance, so spatial and structured on its own, seemed both challenging and ripe for exploration as the overarching scheme of an essay.

“Salsa Rueda” came to the page somewhat naturally. The dance itself rotates, moving from partner to partner, which provided an organic opportunity for a looping, rapid movement from subject to subject that accelerates as the essay progresses. I was also able to keep the present tense situation of the essay grounded within a scene of the dance itself, which allowed me to move at will between one subject of the essay in the present tense—dancing with a real person in real time—and the other subject, abuse, trauma, and trust, in scenes and reflection that required very little transition material. I found the large-scale, exaggerated patterns of Salsa Rueda to be rigid enough to shape the necessary subject matter. “West Coast Swing” was more difficult and I struggled to find ways to conform narrative content to the basic steps and patterns of the very fluid dance, which all ended up too restrictive or contrived. As the essay became longer, it became necessary to stick to a more chronological format with the references to the dance weaving in and out when appropriate, which I think was truer to the spirit of the dance than it would be to confine the story to a particular structure.

I feel I have evolved substantially as a writer during the time spent working on these pieces. When I wrote the first draft of “Salsa Rueda,” I was reluctant to revise it. Though it was one of the rare occasions where I was able to write something fairly satisfying all at once, I hadn’t yet reached the point where I felt comfortable making major changes to a piece in the pursuit of something even better. After a good deal of time away from my first essay and many drafts that I declared finished with far too much confidence, I think I am (mostly) done changing paragraphs that were not doing enough emotional work and reworking language that was unnecessarily confusing.

“West Coast Swing” started as a collection of barely-comprehensible journals from various psych wards and difficult afternoons, and after it became something resembling an essay

went through at least six drafts so far. Through months of rewrites and revisions to what I consider to be my best work, I think I've learned a lot. This project has forced me to stick with material I would not normally have persevered through—when the first few versions were sloppy and sprawling, with no central question or “Salsa Rueda”-style inspiration in sight, it would have been easy to abandon them in pursuit of an essay a little neater, but I think working with these events and patterns and getting them to the state they are in today has taught me that there is, at least theoretically, potential in any journal entry or close observation when adequate work is put in. I've worked more than even before with reflection, which I consider one of my weaknesses. I prefer to write in almost entirely scene, hopefully allowing the reader to make the connections between images and make emotional interpretations on their own, but there was so great a bulk of material in “West Coast Swing” that at times, small paragraphs of reflection were unavoidable. The essay is still primarily scene-based, which I consider a feature of my current writing style, but I was forced by the unique demands of this very long essay to make connections on the page and explore questions that I would have otherwise left dangling.

The length of “West Coast Swing” also demanded close attention to shaping a narrative strong enough to carry the reader through numerous episodes, which I feel I handled well, and an exhausting attention to language without the luxury of short, poetic paragraphs and connected images. I think there is still work to do on this essay before the possibility of publication, but I think I have strengths in writing meaning-dense, interesting scenes and connecting them in ways that make overarching questions visible without much direct interpretation on my part. I hope to continue to smooth out the kinks in the narrative of this piece, perhaps gain some more distance from its subject matter, and complete more sentence-level revisions before submitting for publication.

Although my original plan for these essays was to work toward an extended collection with more dance-based essays, I believe the phase of my life where dance is central to my personal development has passed, so these will likely be the only two and they are too different to be yoked together into a coherent collection. I intend to submit both for publication separately, “Salsa Rueda” this summer, “West Coast Swing” after some time and further revisions to the few magazines that accept long-form (essays around 10,000 words). As an exercise, I would also like to try writing brief, one or two-thousand-word pieces exploring these same themes and dances, to see what is lost, what is gained, and if I can do it. These would be consistent with another project I am working on, using a list of art forms and minor joys that keep me anchored in the world as source material for a number of reflective journals to eventually become essays. I think it will be an interesting challenge to practice both long-form narratives and extreme concision.

As a writer, I am inspired most by my content, which I wish to express as simply and honestly as I can. I have felt a kinship with the writing of Alysia Sawchyn, especially “Control,” which is an experimental essay in nine squares (published in *Diagram*) dealing with topics of eating disorders and psychological treatment in a spare style with little reflection. The majority of writers I have come across in my classes have had longer to develop distinct reflective voices, and as such they feel more present as individuals in their work. I admire many of these classic essays a great deal (“The Pain Scale” by Eula Biss, “The Fourth State of Matter” by Joann Beard, anything by Cheryl Strayed), but I feel there are grand statements about human experience made in these authors’ writing that I feel are true when I read them, but I don’t feel entitled to make in my own reflection. It would seem presumptuous to me to suggest that I understand any small amount about even my own experiences with trauma and mental illness, let alone that I have anything to teach to others. By focusing on the facts of the events themselves

and interrogating them as closely as I can in these two essays, especially “West Coast Swing,” I hope to begin to develop the habits of mind and close observation that will eventually allow me to speak some sort of wisdom into my own experiences, even if it is only ever the wisdom of uncertainty. Reading the work of other young writers like Sawchyn encourages me to complicate and explore scene in new ways, and live in the fresh detail and power of that inexperienced space, which has its own originality and value, while my voice develops. I hope to grow into the genres of nonfiction that the aforementioned writers occupy; I want to continue to write about the serious things I have been through and will probably go through in the future, and look at them in new ways with lyricism and unusual structures and forms. It is essential to my mental health to write, to view my experiences as part of an artistic pattern, and I am just beginning that journey. I will continue to develop my reflective voice as I revise “West Coast Swing” toward publication and work on further projects.

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Salsa Rueda

I press my left hand to the right hand of my partner. Three other couples mirror this motion in a kaleidoscope of dance. Rhythm underlays everything like a pulse folded over on itself—*one* two three four *five* six seven and *one* two three four *five* six seven. I keep the basic step beneath my body. After six months' practice salsa feels as natural as walking.

“Mambo!”

My partner releases me and I am claimed by the lead on my right, David, who is calling the Rueda tonight as always. He is our instructor as well as our friend. He is a big man, divorced, and in his late twenties, though he looks older; he teaches dance lessons across half the state. He is subtly graceful on the dance floor, with a firm, confident leading style that can make any inexperienced follow look good. We dance face-to-face, our steps intersecting back and forth as we first learned them. I trust him. He was the first man in three years to earn my trust.

“Rueda!”

Back to my first partner. Rueda means “wheel,” a sort of Latin square-dance created in Cuba in the 1950s. Commands vary from group to group; occasionally David invents a new one, just for kicks. It is accepted etiquette in the dance community never to join a Rueda without express invitation. There might be a whole complex code to the rotation, and if you reach for the wrong person or move too fast, someone could get hurt.

“Dame!”

I relax, hold still, and wait for David to come to me. Around the circle, three other follows do the same. He turns me across to his right—a change of partners. I am always tempted to move toward him, to create my own momentum, to take control and make sure I am where I need to be. I have been chided for this before. I must step in place, keep my rhythm, let it happen.

One two three four *five* six seven and *one* two three four *five* six seven...

The first dance I learned was not salsa, it was the slower, simpler, more sensual bachata. My best friend dragged me to the lesson for her birthday, determined to try something new. I was nervous, but we couldn't find the cheap Mexican restaurant and missed the introduction and suddenly I was in the arms of Michele. Her dark red hair was pulled back with a million bobby pins, her posture was impeccable, and when she spoke her voice was crisp but patient, each word softly inflected. She was willowy and taller than me in her golden dance heels. She placed her narrow hand in my shoulder blade and lifted my stiff tentative arm over hers. “The step is going to be sideways, one two three tap, one two three *good*. Just relax. I'll take care of you.” I had no time to be afraid. I kept my feet moving and my anxious brain quiet, and she took care of me.

“Enchufla!”

Another, more complicated change of partners. David turns me in a circle through the ring of dancers, then releases me and Michele pulls me towards her, dodging the leg of one of the tables remaining in the dining room. My left hand mirrors her right. Though she is a brilliant follow, she usually leads on Thursday nights. There are never enough male leads for everyone.

For a long time, I wasn't so sure about the whole dancing-with-men thing. David is older and stronger, once lifting me bridal-style in his arms to show off. The other experienced leads who drop by often comment on my weak technique, something I have grown to appreciate. Besides, there is a lot of contact in partner dance. I have been grabbed by the shoulders, the ribs, the hips, even had my face stroked in what Michele lovingly calls the "bitch-slap turn." I have danced inches from complete strangers and let them move my body against theirs in sensuous rolls.

Three years ago my abuser asked me to teach him how to dance. I think he just wanted to feel my breasts shoved so tight against his chest I couldn't breathe.

"Sombbrero!"

David taps the top of his head to signal the turn, though his voice carries in the small failing restaurant where we still meet. Tacky disco lights vibrate across the sticky floor. Bottles of Corona suspend a dubious sombrero behind the bar, where a few patrons sip enormous neon margaritas. Michele wraps me up in my own arms. We're nearly the same height—I don't have proper dance shoes yet, but I do have heels of my own. She makes eye contact each time we're turned toward one another, sometimes a funny face, sometimes a smile. Her eyes are pale green and welcoming, catching the circles of color spinning across her skin. She makes me feel seen,

known, wanted, even at my worst. She's so tired this late at night but somehow manages to find energy for me, nodding her approval when my confidence falters.

Michele sits next to me on the floor during panic attacks, not speaking, just placing one slender hand on my knee. She once told me that I feel like solitude to her. It is the most profound compliment I have ever received.

“Mambo!”

I am face-to-face with Lucas, the elegant hipster I may or may not still have a crush on. His dark eyes are bright and mobile with reflections from the flat-screens above the bar. His grasp is so light that sometimes we slip apart mid-pattern, though now his slim fingers are looped firmly against mine. We have held hands so much over the months of Thursdays that sometimes I forget I can't just reach for him.

We had spoken only in passing when I confessed my romantic interest in him. Two nights later I told him about the abuse, my ex's control over my body, his manipulation into unwanted forms of the intimacy I craved. Lucas cried and said I was the strongest person he knew. I think I hoped his response would soothe away the ache, that he would heal me. It has taken hundreds of dances and dozens of conversations, but in some ways, he has.

He let me down easy and then, when that didn't work, he let me down hard. We've been close ever since. When something changes between us, a difficult night or a shared secret, it only brings us closer.

“Torro!”

Lucas ducks under my arm and my original partner walks towards me. I am wearing a bright green gauzy dress that Michele found for me at Goodwill. It fits me perfectly and swirls a little with every step. Each spin is like magic.

I am beautiful.

“Rueda!”

At junior prom my abuser and I didn’t dance at all. Instead I chose a gown so he could peel the single strap off my shoulder and get at the softness beneath, wear out the dress tape so I would feel dirty and disheveled for the rest of the night. I believed then that I would feel dirty and disheveled for the rest of my life. I learned to want it.

“Dame!”

The first time David tried to dip me, I was so terrified of being dropped I leaned my entire body weight into his shoulders. He laughed at me and turned it into a hug. “You really don’t want to be dipped, do you?” Though the song had already ended, I insisted that he show me how to do it right. He shifted my weight and laid me out across his knee. I relaxed as completely as I knew how and let it happen. Then he lifted me back onto my feet, and thanked me. It was a long time before he tried again, but whenever I thought he might, I prepared myself, remembering that David didn’t want to hurt me, that he was one of the good ones. He picked me up for lessons in his cluttered Lincoln. He offered me food whenever I seemed depressed. When I withdrew to the

ladies' room to cry, he made sure I was okay before whirling me back into the wildest, fastest, craziest salsa, singing along in incomprehensible Spanglish until I laughed.

Since then, he has almost dropped me a couple of times because I trust him too completely.

“Enchufla!”

If not for Michele, I never would have found the rhythm in my body. I looked up at her in the humid dimness of the Mexican restaurant and felt clumsy and uncertain, but somehow I knew I was worthy. She told me I was doing wonderfully and I believed her. It was instant and complete and inexplicable. Her constant refrain of *relax* became engrained in me like a mantra. *Let your arm rest on top of mine. Think loose and heavy. Good.*

“Dame!”

One two three four five six seven and one two three four five six seven...

“Coca-Cola!”

David invites me to every event at his studio.

“Mambo!”

Lucas and I have hung out one-on-one a handful of times now—he’s bought me tea, we’ve made sushi together, we’ve painted with leftover acrylics on the floor of my not-yet-furnished apartment. Never once did I consider what he could hypothetically do to me. Even writing down the possibility feels like a sacrilege. He is gentleness, kindness, safety. He is where I go when it feels like even the air might hurt me.

“Torro!”

My abuser read every poem I ever wrote. I spent hours combing through my thick journals of neat free verse, attaching to each a yellow Post-It note with an explanation of its background and meaning. It took him months to return them to me. In the meantime, I scribbled broken sonnets and odes to his body.

“Dos moscas!”

Everyone claps twice. It’s midnight on a Thursday and we’re all exhausted but the music is loud and our laughter is louder.

“Dame!”

David scoops me into his arms. His voice rings in my ear. I don’t understand how to talk to him yet, but I understand his dance, and that’s enough. Just to show off, he leads a body roll—both our hips gyrate. I am not limber enough and get off beat; I follow his steady rhythm, and he

sticks his tongue out at me, face reflecting red in the whirling lights. My skirts are a swish of emerald around me. My legs are short, strong, and ultimately mine.

“Sombrero complicado!”

After a couple of months of dancing together I discovered that Michele had herself been abused—four years of emotional torment. I barely knew her then but I had to reach out. I typed and retyped: “Hey, I was just wondering...” “Hey so I have a similar...” “Hey did you know I also...” I couldn’t let it go.

“Hey can I ask you a personal question?”

Typing bubbles: “I actually love personal questions and am very comfortable answering them! Go ahead.”

“How did you learn to trust again?”

A long pause. “I think I’m just a trusting person. May I ask if you have a similar experience?”

“I was emotionally and sexually abused for two years in high school.”

“It breaks my heart to hear you say that. I never want to push you to disclose more than you are comfortable, but I would always be willing to share stories.”

Over months of afternoon coffees and dance classes, we shared our stories. We stayed up all night at an event to raise awareness and fight sex trafficking. When her abuser was sending her passive aggressive messages, she showed them to me. When I despaired of ever finding someone who wanted me, she reminded me to hold on to my standards. We found in one another a unique understanding. Michele and I both knew how much someone we loved could hurt us,

and how much it meant to be able to love people who wouldn't. Every time she smiled at me across the room or kept me company when the walls closed in, I came one day closer to remembering how to trust.

The men Michele and I trust are kind. We can give David our bodies for the duration of a notoriously-long salsa, be as under his control as possible, and emerge safe and valued and independent and respected. Lucas will ask before trying something that requires extra closeness, and apologize if he even suspects he has already crossed a boundary. The men Michele and I trust tease us gently and ask if we're feeling okay and pause the lesson to give us a ride home if we just need to get some sleep. The men Michele and I trust would never lie to us, or belittle us, or assert their will over ours. The men Michele and I trust are always there when they are needed, but they know when to step away.

The men Michele and I trust are worthy.

For the first time in three years I believe in the goodness of humanity, and I relax myself into that goodness every Thursday at nine o'clock in a sketchy Mexican restaurant.

When the Rueda ends, David pulls me into a hug. He's warm and a little sweaty already. I don't worry about what he might be thinking when my body is against his—this is just who we are. Everyone gives everyone a hug. Lucas smells faintly of cologne and his beard brushes my neck. Michele holds on to me for a long moment. I can feel her slowing down, lean dance muscle relaxing like she's planning to stay with me all night. When I pull away, she smiles.

West Coast Swing

When I first learned to dance, I couldn't tell from the music which steps to expect. I went to socials and sat cross-legged along the wall, playing "name that dance," staring at the slick feet of strangers and waiting for an experienced lead to teach me the basics. Gradually I came to recognize most of them: waltz, tango, rumba, foxtrot. The miscellaneous ones—the quirky, upbeat, unexpected songs on the playlist—I learned to attribute to West Coast Swing. I watched its fluid loops, its loose athletic connections, its flights of elegance, fascinated. I heard rumors about the difficulty of the dance, about its steep learning curve. Daunted, I tried to focus my energy elsewhere.

I had already been dancing for six months before my first West Coast lesson. We were at a downtown entertainment space above the vacant unit that, a year later, would become our dance studio. The stiletto-eaten hardwood floors threatened to give way beneath us. David, the soon-to-be studio owner, was teaching intermediate whip patterns. I followed as best I could, mimicking with grave intention the steps I was shown.

I was not taught the basic shorthand that starts most beginner lessons: a *step step triple-step triple-step* that can be fit together in endless combinations. Instead, I was thrown into material far above my level. After the lesson, overwhelmed, I stuck to salsa and hustle and rumba and the other dances I knew well. I wasn't interested in thinking. I was here to follow, to let others choose my steps for a few hours. When the buzzing bass and effervescent small talk became too much for me, I withdrew to a small side room with a window seat overlooking the deserted Indiana intersection. The light was red. Michele was already there, sitting quietly; she was not yet a dance teacher, not yet compelled by her position to mingle. She had been dancing

all night and was now ready to go home. So was I. We didn't know each other well yet, but I loved her and wanted her to love me. We sat, our backs half-turned to the window's wall of darkness.

I don't remember what we said, or how it was between us before the thousand hurts we would share. I don't remember what it was like to sit in the relaxed anonymity of new friends.

Lucas was there too, that night. He drove me home after in his parents' van, talking respectfully to me about the two things we shared, music and Michele. He wasn't yet my teacher, wasn't yet my friend. I already trusted him.

My second West Coast lesson took place on the dance floor, in the sparsely-furnished living room of a third-floor apartment in a complex called the Haven. Lucas was David's roommate as well as his employee, and they were hosting a party. The messy marble-topped bar held a plate of David's famous guava pastries, a pitcher of uncertain vodka cocktail, and lychee candies bought in bulk at a local Asian grocery. I was watching Lucas and Michele laugh together and trying not to attract attention on the faux-leather couch when David asked me to dance.

"I don't know how to West Coast," I told him. Disclaimers like this were still common for me. Besides, Lucas had just asked Michele to dance, and I would have much rather watched their effortless movements than have to think about my own.

"That's okay, just relax," David said, stretching me away from him and creating tension between us. I wasn't experienced enough to say no to him. "You're going to start by walking two steps forward, starting with your right foot: slow, slow, good," and I did, self-consciously,

passing him as he moved out of my way. “Then you’ll take three steps in place, yes, and another three. Beautiful! That’s to collect your weight.” And then we were dancing. I watched my feet stumble in and out of rhythm. I messed up, a lot.

“I’m sorry, I keep wanting to step backwards.”

“You’re doing great,” he said breathlessly with a smile, pulling me into a whip pattern. At least I wasn’t interfering with what he was doing. The song ended before I felt comfortable and I walked off the floor toward Michele.

“Yikes,” I said to her sympathetic smile. It was months before I tried again.

My third West Coast lesson was in my collegiate ballroom dance club, taught entirely by Michele even before she began her professional career. She was passionate about West Coast and wanted us to be passionate about it too, even though it wasn’t technically ballroom and was not an event at DanceSport competitions. The ballroom dancers, with their arched waltz frames and sultry samba hips, struggled. I teetered on my brand new ballroom shoes—skinny ballet-pink heels with soft felt bottoms and no arch support.

“You’re going to settle *away* from your partner,” Michele shouted over the murmur of feet on sticky Rec Center floorboards. “Pretend like you’re sitting back into a chair. Just a little bit. You should feel like if your partner moves, you would have to move too, or else fall over.” She was my partner just then, and her strained voice stung. When she extended away from me, I did the same, trying to stack my shoulders over my hips like she said. She smiled. “You don’t have the momentum problems a lot of follows do when they first start learning. You could be

really good at this.” Her green eyes brightened with the kind of warmth that had first drawn me to her, an encouragement that she gave out indiscriminately, but which always felt unique. She gave my hands a squeeze, then stepped back and shouted, “Rotate!”

As I moved to the next lead, feeling cherished, I decided this was definitely my dance.

I don’t remember much about the first time I cut myself. My journal reports that on February 6, 2017, I “woke up intensely, numbly suicidal, barely did class and didn’t do homework.” At home I found a box cutter left over from an art class. Vague, divorced from reality and memory, I sat on the edge of my neatly-made bed and scratched my arm until it seeped dark blood. I texted Michele to tell her I needed her. She walked twenty minutes from her apartment in flip-flops with a roll of gauze. This I know, but I cannot recall what I was thinking.

“Is this the first time this has happened?” she asked me, calm, clinical. Michele and Lucas both were training to be counselors, and they knew how to care for me—though I would test their limits past the point of kindness in the months ahead.

“Yes,” I’m sure I said. My voice probably sounded flat in my ears.

I remember the second time I cut myself. Only four days had passed since the first. My journal asked me “If this day was an animal, what would it be?”

“A human being,” I wrote.

I came home from a skipped class and found an Xacto knife. A brittle shrill of excitement lit up my gut like a broken neon sign. I changed into leggings I wouldn't mind staining. I pulled aside the shower curtain and perched on the pale edge of the bath. Lucas was texting me, trying to bring me back, but I couldn't listen. This was necessary. Everything was screaming in my head and I had to prove that it was real. I needed to be taken seriously, and for that I needed an external sign of the internal fire. I don't know what I said to make him concerned about my safety, but I was ready to accept his help. I wanted it. At least, part of me wanted it, his kind eyes to soothe away the violent self-hatred that tainted my body. The other part of me wanted to die.

I sliced into my skin. This knife was sharp enough. Fat drops welled up.

He called me. I answered. "Are you hurting yourself?"

I hung up. I knew he would be terrified, but I needed to do this. I needed real help. I needed...I didn't know what I needed, but I wasn't willing to stop. I made another red line, then another. It was like drawing.

Caitlyn, do you need an ambulance?

No. Another. Please don't call them. It's not that bad.

Okay...I'm going to talk to my TA and be out there on the next bus. Please, be safe.

Another. He was skipping class for me. He must really care about me. Right? I must mean something to him. It was enough to puncture my resolve.

I looked at the strings of garish droplets clustered near the drain. I examined the diagonal stripes on my arm, impassive. It looked awful. I couldn't let him see this. He would be scared enough as it was. I ran the faucet.

When he arrived, I was at the door. "It's not as bad as it looks," I told him.

He wrapped my wounds in leftover gauze, first too loose then too tight. Then he held me. He put my hand on his chest and I pressed my face hard into his collarbone. When his strong fingers pulled my head against his sturdy, real, safe shoulder, where I didn't have to keep my eyes open, I was where I wanted to be. I couldn't hate myself with him loving me, guiding me. Neither of us could have known then how dangerous that intimate comfort would prove for us both.

"I'm sorry," I whispered into his crisp shirt. "I'm so sorry." When I said it, I meant it.

That year Michele was frenetically busy. She was Social Justice Secretary for student council, an officer for two different clubs, TA for a massive Psychology lecture, teaching ballroom classes twice a week, dancing as much as she could. She was also falling apart. She did not tell me why she was suffering, but I knew that she slept little, ate less. I slowly learned to see her exhaustion between the affirming comments and impeccable technique.

Even so, one night I texted her, late: *I'm scared, love.*

She arrived in the rain. My roommate was sleeping. All the lights were out; the motion-activated lamp above my front door turned off when she walked under it. We scaled the stairs quietly. I lent her a pair of my sweatpants to replace her damp jeans.

I crawled between the deep comforters of my squishy twin bed, and she crawled in after me. We lay there for a while, still, my hair against her breath.

Lucas acted as my primary caregiver. When I stayed up late watching NC-17 movies that scared me and eating entire bags of artisan lollipops instead of dinner, I would ask him to call me, and when he did I stopped self-destructing immediately to curl up on my bed in my oversized t-shirt and let his quiet voice wash over me. When I was on campus and dissociation kept me from going to class, he put off his TA responsibilities to walk in the quad, pointing out wildflowers, telling stories about the life he lived before college. He held my hands in his gloves and looked at me with his serious, spectacled, beautiful face. When I came too close to falling for him and made him remind me that we'd never be more than friends, he was gentle, and he always held me afterward. I learned to associate the circle of his arms with real safety.

He almost attempted suicide in high school, he told me, on a bench in the woods just beginning to emerge from snow. It would have been a terrible thing to do to his mother. I watched him, wide-eyed. I haven't told many people about this, he said.

Later that afternoon, we traveled to a ballroom dance competition out of state. When my night got dangerous so far from home, he let me stay in his room in my pajamas until the violence left me and I was ready to fall asleep.

I should make it clear that I did seek professional help. I saw half a dozen different counselors, with varying degrees of success, and a psychiatrist who prescribed me medications that worked and then didn't. I learned and forgot scores of coping mechanisms. I began to recover more quickly from the panic attacks that leveled me. It had been a couple of months since I had hurt

myself, and I was even confident enough to withdraw from therapy. I had a support system, two real friends that I could rely on, and they made even bad days worthwhile. I was dancing a lot, and occasionally, someone taught me a bit of West Coast.

I was trying.

Then it was summer again. I had been dancing for a year and a half. My West Coast follow was basic but functional; I could do almost anything a lead wanted me to, with almost no flair. My ballroom shoes were beginning to tatter. David's studio had been open for a couple of months. David and Lucas still lived in their apartment at the Haven, though they no longer hosted parties there. Michele was staying just across the parking lot. I had moved in with her days earlier, subleasing the bedroom of a mutual friend.

I woke up suicidal. I walked to the bus stop, prepared to buy a new Xacto knife and slit my wrists in the shower. Lucas, on his way to his own counseling appointment, found me.

"Are you okay?"

I considered lying. As I began to cry, that possibility went out the window. I shook my head.

"What's the matter?"

I trembled. He sat down beside me and held me close.

"You know, I...I don't want to pry, but...you weren't going to the art store, were you?"

I buried my face in his shoulder, unable to lie, unable to tell him the truth. He led me back to Michele's apartment and shut me inside. I sobbed until I screamed. *I am alone.*

It was time for plan B.

That afternoon, I visited Lucas' place and grabbed a handful of lychee candies off the counter, left from the party over a year ago. We sat on the uncomfortable sofa. He asked me how I was. I told him fine, as if he hadn't seen me at the bus stop, as if my purse wasn't full of prescription drugs. I lied to him. The part of me that knew better was not in control.

Lucas left me in the spare bedroom, the safe space where I had ridden out panic attacks before. I waited until he had gone to the studio to teach evening classes. I lay on the beige pile carpet and counted my pills: a whole bottle of Lexapro, some Zoloft, some leftover anti-anxiety PRNs from an earlier visit to the hospital. I assembled them into neat lines, then placed them back into their respective containers. I refilled my water bottle from the lukewarm tap. I lay back down, stared at the dust clinging to the crinkled plaster ceiling. Part of me was lonely, inconsolably lonely, desperate for their care and attention. Part of me wanted to die. This was the compromise, and it was out of my hands. The plan was in motion. It was a relief not to be in control anymore. I watched the clock on my phone, counting down the minutes.

At 7:15, I took all of my pills, swallowing them down on an empty stomach. At 7:30, Michele finished teaching her Monday night ballroom class. *I did something bad*, I texted her. *Come and get me. I need to go to the hospital now.*

I'm on my way, she said. *I'll bring bandages.*

No, I said. *Something else. Pills.*

Do you need an ambulance?

No.

Daydreaming dizzy on the floor, I imagined them all coming for me. I imagined being unable to walk, David called upon to pick me up and carry me down the stairs like I knew he could. I imagined being the center of gentle worry, guided by people who cared, able to let go and let them lead. I imagined an end to loneliness. I wondered if I would die. I didn't really care anymore though, now that Michele was coming. If I died, at least I wouldn't be alone. At least they'd be loving me. If I didn't die, that was okay too. It was out of my hands.

Michele arrived and held my arm as I walked downstairs to her car. As she drove me to Ball Memorial her slim fingers drummed on the steering wheel. I felt funny but fine. My eyes brimmed with sky and pavement. My body was an echo of itself. Pleasurably numb. But she was here. It would be okay. They didn't make me wait at the emergency room like they had before.

"My friend overdosed," Michele said to the woman behind the counter.

"Do you have the bottles?"

"Yes." People everywhere. A wheelchair with balloons on it. Potted plants. Everyone pastel-colored, purple, blue, white masks.

"Were you trying to hurt yourself, sweetie?" The pastel woman looked at me.

This couldn't be my fault. How did I get here? "Yes," I said, clearly.

Someone took my blood pressure. They walked me through the big sliding doors.

Michele followed, graceful, dancer. The doctors asked her questions. Her responses were crisp, punctuated with grim smiles. I couldn't take my eyes off her, tall, red hair branching and trailing from the glints of bobby pins. When she looked at me, there was only gentleness.

“It’s going to be okay, sweetie,” a nurse said to me, and she gave me a paper gown to wear, took my bra and phone. She began to stick a million sensors to my chest and stomach. It was cold. I wanted Lucas to hold me. Someone brought me a white knit blanket.

I know it will be okay, I would never have said. Michele is here. Soon Lucas will be here too.

I think I made a joke, and Michele laughed, brave.

Michele held my hair as I vomited green pill dust into the sink.

I was moved to a room in cardio care around 3 o’clock in the morning. Michele left me only once, to buy a cup of coffee. I tried to sleep. Lucas, stranded at the studio, slept less than I did. In the morning Michele brought him by and went home to nap. He sat beside the bed and held my hand. I was tied to the ECG machine. I didn’t want him to hold me anymore; paper chafed against my loose breasts, and though I was okay with him seeing me at my least attractive, I didn’t want him to feel me respond to his touch. I cried from discomfort and he whispered, over and over, that I’d get out soon. Even so, he was with me, he was spending the whole day with me, and I didn’t regret anything. In some strange way, this was better than I could have imagined. When I had to pee, I called a nurse, and she stood in the room as I sat on the toilet with the door open. Lucas moved to the furthest corner of the living area and never mentioned it. This felt to me then like intimacy.

We watched *Rear Window* and *Midnight in Paris*. We ordered in Panera Bread, and I spilled tomato soup on the white hospital linens. Nurses came and went, taking an endless

rotation of vital signs that I eventually lost track of. We waited for the psychologists to evaluate me and determine whether I was safe to be released.

The psychologist was a woman we knew from dance. She had been crying. I had wanted us to be friends. We waited for her shift to end and another to arrive.

I didn't want to spend the night again. Mostly, I didn't want Lucas to leave me.

Don't leave me.

Eventually the nurses found an ECG machine that I could wear between my breasts, unbinding me from my bed. They gave me back my sweater and bra. I trembled with joy and traced out basic West Coast steps on the floor with my filthy hospital-issue socks. *Step, step, triple-step, triple-step.* I wanted to ask Lucas to lead me, but he had done so much already. I didn't dance alone for long. I didn't think there was much I could do without him. Even so, it was a little celebration of my freedom. It would be okay, and okay meant something now, meant being alive in the world with my friends around me, taking care of me. I would get what I needed. Lucas stood next to my bed and gave me my first hug in 24 hours.

When I got home the next morning, I went immediately to his place to shower, avoiding the bathroom at Michele's apartment where I was supposed to bleed out. I stood in the doorway of the spare bedroom. He wrapped me up in his arms, close, warm, slender dance-muscled arms crossed across my back, and whispered, "I'm so glad you're safe." He didn't want to let me go. I was wanted. My body, in this moment, countered every argument my broken brain could give.

I keep returning to that embrace, over and over, even knowing how abusive my dependence became. Nothing since has ever felt as good.

That summer, they didn't leave me.

I sat at the bar in the third-floor apartment. I was building tiny houses using butter chips from David's catering business; Lucas was washing dishes. His broken iPhone was plugged into the speakers, and he was singing along to Queen's "Lover Boy."

I was quiet, comfortable, pleased by the depth of the silence between us, so okay as long as I could be with him, the violent self-hatred held at bay hour by hour.

"Do you want to put something on?" he asked as the song ended.

Hesitant, I queued up one of my favorite Indie bands—"Coffee," by Sylvan Esso. Lucas dried his hands and came around the counter, reaching out toward me. I expected a hug, but instead he created distance, stretched me away from him. We stepped onto the beat and were dancing, in our socks, in great loose circles.

Do you love me? the speakers sang.

Lucas wrapped me up in my own arms, against him, and smiled at me. Then he spun me out. "Good," he said, and I smiled back. I was slightly off-beat, slipping on the hardwood, but it didn't matter because Lucas was confident and steady.

Michele took me to the studio that summer when she taught private lessons. When her clients asked who I was, she said I'd rather hang out there than in our empty apartment; technically true. Sometimes it went well, and I sat on the floor in the corner, painting with watercolors in my journal or writing about how much I loved my two best friends. Sometimes it didn't go well, and I descended to the white pleather couch in the basement, where I curled up and sobbed quietly until she could take me home.

Michele was cooking both of us breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She told me her schedule ahead of time so I could plan where to not be alone. On Friday evenings we would drink Walmart Malbec and watch children's movies on Netflix, anything to keep the night positive. She even let me sit on her bed, her safe space, as she sorted clothes for Goodwill.

She was sacrificing her alone time, and I was grateful, but not ashamed. Many times, I thought I'd be happy for this to continue forever.

On Fridays and Saturdays, Lucas and Michele worked at David's wood-fired pizza cart, and to keep me safe they started to bring me with them. I sat beneath the dough table where the flour sifted over my hair and boots. When experimental pizzas were made for staff, they fed me a slice. Sometimes I helped fold boxes. Mostly I drew, or asked someone to dance during slow times, scraping out steps in street shoes on the coarse concrete.

By nighttime, it was consistently bad for me, and I would text them begging for help.

No matter how tired he was, no matter how gross he felt stinking of woodsmoke, Lucas always let me come home with him afterward. He held me, or talked me down, or told me that I

was, in fact, worthy of love. Sometimes I couldn't stop screaming. Sometimes I slept in the spare bedroom, and he slept on the couch so I could reach him in the night. I didn't think about his exhaustion, his feelings, his depression. I don't know if I could.

This, every night. This, constant. This, normal.

I moved into a new house at the end of the summer, away from them. I unpacked my dishes into the cabinets, hung my towels next to my roommates' in the bathroom. I vacuumed. From my bedroom windows I watched blue jays pick at the crumbling picnic table on the back porch. I went for walks by myself in the toasted neighborhood, ate quiet solitary breakfasts on the window seat, watched movies alone before going to sleep in my narrow bed.

When they responded to my text messages, Michele and Lucas were proud of how well I was doing by myself. When they didn't respond, I bit my lip, promising myself I could survive the next one hour, two hours, eight hours without them. Classes started, and I would go a whole week seeing them only once, across the stretch of a West Coast frame on Tuesday night.

It was going well, I promise.

The semester accelerated and text-back tempo slowed. I enrolled in a Dialectic Behavioral Therapy group recommended by my counselor. I did most of the reading for my 19th century literature class. I bought salad and salad dressing. It was going well. It was going well.

I promise.

But they weren't there. They didn't have time to text me. I wasn't okay. How could I be okay if the only worthwhile feeling, the feeling of being cared for, the feeling of letting go, the feeling of someone else choosing the best steps for me, was out of reach? How could I be okay if they weren't actively, constantly, loving me? How could *I* love me?

I texted Lucas over and over begging him to spend time with me between classes. He wouldn't do it anymore. And I knew why. I knew it was too much for him. I knew what I wanted, what I *needed*, was unbalanced and unhealthy. No one could be expected to take care of me the way Lucas and Michele had that summer. But I couldn't do without it.

On October 15th Michele took me to the hospital and I was admitted to the psych ward for persistent suicidal ideations. By the time the psychologists saw me, I had been sitting next to her in the waiting room for almost an hour, talking quietly, and I felt fine. That was all I needed. She made me promise I would stay anyway, so I did. I spent three nights sleeping under thin white hospital blankets and eating prepackaged chocolate chip muffins. When I was released, no one celebrated. Lucas didn't hold me in the doorway. It was just back to life, unpacking my wrinkled clothing, buying myself dinner at David's café because all my groceries had spoiled.

October 28th I woke up determined not to do this anymore. I drove to Wal-Mart and bought a wooden spoon, lip balm, rope, and a knife. I unlocked the sunken garage behind my house and examined the sturdy metal rafters crisscrossing overhead. I returned to my bedroom, blinded the windows, and tied a yellow noose. It snaked across the deep brown carpet. I wrote a note: *The world will be more beautiful without me*. My focus wavered; the part of me that wanted them, their attention, interceded just enough to keep me from carrying a chair out to the garage, tying a sturdy knot and a back-up knot. But I still, mostly, wanted to die. I unwrapped the knife

and made eleven medium-to-deep gashes in my wrists. I didn't think I had hit any really dangerous veins but I was satisfied with the amount I was bleeding, satisfied with the visible representation of my pain. I felt lightheaded. I lay curled up with my wrists in front of my face, bleeding softly into the carpet. I texted Michele that she needed to come here now. I texted Lucas that I needed to go to the hospital again.

They showed up, of course.

"Caitlyn, are there any other cuts?" Lucas asked me. He was taking charge and I couldn't tell if I was trembling from blood loss or love for him. In the hazy minutes that it took them to arrive, the need for care had taken over, and I was ready to follow.

"No," I said, woozy.

"Get me some water, please," he said. Michele did. She hadn't said a word. Lucas sponged carefully at my cuts. It didn't hurt. Somehow I knew that they hurt, the way you know things in dreams, but I didn't feel them hurting.

"I don't want to go to the ward again," I told him.

"I know," he said. "Do you have any gauze?"

I didn't. Michele had some in her car, I assume because of me. He pulled carefully at the white elastic skin of my wrists. It kept bleeding.

"We need to go to the ER," he decided. "We just need to. These are pretty deep."

"They're not," I said, but I was too weak and sleepy to argue. Besides, anything that would keep them close to me, prolong their attention, was good. I was too far gone to be ashamed. I just needed them. I twisted upward onto my side, trying to find in their eyes the compassionate sweetness, the intensity I remembered from last time. So little was left.

“Okay,” Michele responded. Their conversation floated back and forth over my head. Lucas covered my wrists clumsily in gauze, then wrapped them in tape left over from the spring. As we walked out to the car, I think he kept a hand protectively on my back. My whole body felt soft and prickly. I wanted him never to stop touching me.

We waited a long time in the hospital, but they put an armband on me immediately. I was placed in the same room as last time. Lucas and Michele sat across from me, barely speaking.

“I’m not going to be able to stay long, I’m sorry,” Lucas said.

“We called your parents,” Michele told me. “They’re on their way.”

I looked desperately between their faces and knew I couldn’t ask for anything more. When my parents arrived, Michele and Lucas both left me. Lucas continued to text, tiredly, explaining as gently as he could that they had things to do, that they couldn’t stay with me this time. Michele didn’t even do that much.

At about 9:00 at night I was tied down onto a stretcher, loaded into the back of an ambulance, and carried down the terrifying hour of red taillights that is I-69. I was freezing cold in a paper dress and Lucas and Michele were out of my reach. I didn’t know where I was going. The attendant told me over and over that it was going to be okay, but the more she said it the less I believed her. My limbs were tensed beneath the seat belts. I had reached the point of no return, and I knew it. They weren’t going to guide me anymore. I was the only one left. I tried to sleep, but my eyes burned too much.

At Options Behavioral Health Hospital, the evening held few options. In the common area the nurses and patients were watching a *Nightmare on Elm Street* marathon, their backs to the high-walled courtyard where they were let out to smoke eight times a day. In the group therapy room, two girls and a man named Jesse were playing Apples to Apples. One lab tech was taking vital signs. My roommate, a homeless woman named China, was in the shower. She had left the radio in our room, planning to listen to a religious program while I tried to sleep. In her absence I tuned it to 107.9 “The Mix.” I had been there for two nights already, in the ward with the double-locked doors and the prison showers, and the only thing left for me to do was fantasize about my freedom. I allowed the sleeve of my t-shirt to slide off the shoulder where my confiscated bra should have been. Ed Sheeran came on:

“The club isn’t the best place to find a lover so the bar is where I go...”

A song I would have been sick of under other circumstances; here, it was much-needed normalcy. I sat back into my hips. It’s impossible to really West Coast alone, but I could pretend. I imagined the slick floorboards of the studio guiding me in a straight line. I stepped forward, *one two triple-step, five six triple-step*. I pitched my weight onto one foot, turned sharply. I rolled my hips forward. *One two three four triple-step, triple-step*. I feigned a push-break, stepping forward, imagining the weight of Lucas or David deflecting me backward with steady hands. *Triple-step, triple-step*. I drew out the beats. My pulse elevated. I stepped heavily onto each foot, swung my body around hard, greedy for endorphins.

The music changed. I yearned for a partner, but focused on looking good for the other patients, who passed outside my door on the way to vitals and called out: “Yeah girl. Get it. She told us she could dance.” They danced too, sprinkler, shopping cart, a dozen others I didn’t echo back. I smiled, but mostly ignored them—this was my dance. I rose to the ball of my foot and

took great sweeping back steps, back toward the frosted window. By the third song I was fully improvising, moving my arms against my body, creating something new within the West Coast rhythm. For now, in this place of extremity, I did what I had to alone.

China walked out in a towel. I fell back onto my bed. Soon it would be time for the medication that put me to sleep on the blue mattress hard as a wrestling mat. Even then, while I waited for the drugs to kick in, I would triple-step and spin down the empty hallway.

The next afternoon I was released. My few belongings, each affixed with my name—WALTER, CAITLYN M—and a barcode, were given back to me at the nurse's station in a paper bag. Someone had misplaced my pens, confiscated due to their wire springs. Techs rummaged through drawers. I told them repeatedly that it didn't matter, I just wanted to leave. I was looking forward to returning to my college town, up the hour of highway I last traversed strapped down and terrified. I was looking forward to sitting at the glossy red bar at David's restaurant, across the street from the dance studio. I was looking forward to Michele and Lucas coming to visit me when their schedules allowed, and wrapping myself around them as tightly as I could. I felt that I would handle their care better this time. I wouldn't hurt myself and scare them again, and I would only ask for help when I really needed it. I was sure of it.

Eventually I convinced the nurses to give up on my pens. A girl named Laura gave me her phone number scrawled on a piece of paper. I put on my bra and boots in the tiny, locked bathroom.

My father picked me up. I climbed gratefully into the passenger seat of the Honda. He offered to buy me lunch from a restaurant. "I'll just have some soup at home, I guess. I'm planning to get a Cuban sandwich for dinner." He was silent. I didn't read too much into it. My father had always been a man of few words.

At my parents' house, though, he refused to give me my phone. He told me that he and my mother wanted to talk to me. I paced, trying to maintain my good mood. "I don't like this. I've been restricted from my things for days now."

"That's true," he said. I waited. All I wanted was to call Lucas. He would tell me it was okay.

I ate Campbell's tomato soup. My mother arrived. She hurried to her room to change clothes. I waited testily in the kitchen, glancing from my father to the empty doorway.

"We didn't want to tell you this while you were at Options," my mother said. "But your roommate has been in touch with us. Melissa. Apparently she's been through some things in her past. She says that if you move back in to the house, she will move out."

All the blood fell out of my head and shattered against the concrete in my stomach.

"Why?"

"I don't know. But we're not really comfortable with you going back up to a house where you're going to be by yourself. We're just not comfortable with that, Caitlyn."

"I am, though."

"How would we know that you would be safe?" I watched the fear in my mother's eyes become panic.

"See, I thought through it while I was in Options. I'm going to drop all my classes except one to focus on my mental health. I'm going to keep my job. I'll revise my scale to include

different things I can do to cope based on how bad it is. At a six I'll tell someone. At a seven I'll need to be in bed. At a nine I'll check in to the hospital. Things like that."

"Which sounds great, but can we be sure you'd do that?"

"I'd have Lucas and Michele." I looked from closed door to closed door.

"We've been talking to them too. They're really burnt out, it seems like. They can't continue to keep you safe anymore."

"I'm so tired. I just want to sleep in my own bed." I swiftly, consciously gave up my dignity as the tears begin to burn again. "I haven't slept in a week. I just want to sleep in my own bed."

"We know. But your safety is more important."

"Are you telling me I can't go home?"

"We were really hoping you would agree with us. Or at least see the necessity. We're going to talk to your therapist, but we really think inpatient is a good option."

"I'm not going to agree with you. I want to sleep in my own bed." Stripped of independence, I found myself ugly-sobbing with both my parents' eyes on me.

"Then I guess that is what we're saying," my father told me, calmly.

"Can I have my phone now?"

He removed my fully-charged iPhone from his pocket. Feeling more like a sulky teenager than I had since fourteen, and hating it, I ran from the room.

Lucas didn't answer. Michele responded and called me immediately.

“Hey, love. How does it feel to be out?”

“I don’t get to go home.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I heard about that.”

I was crying more softly, shocks of incongruous euphoria cracking through me from the sound of her voice. “Do you think I should go to inpatient?” I asked her.

A long silence. I imagined her slender hands pushing back the hair from my face, her lean dance muscles occasionally twitching as I pressed my head into her collarbones. I imagined the way she used to take care of me, no matter when or how. I knew I couldn’t count on returning to that, but I had been through too much to handle that thought right now.

“I think that’s certainly something to consider.”

My admiration for her overcame the sense of betrayal, shifting the equilibrium inside me with dizzying suddenness. Maybe, then. If she thought so. Maybe.

I told her, sounding childish even to myself, “I want to be held.”

“I know. I know. Soon.”

She hung up. I laid my phone next to my face, stretched out beneath the quilt of my childhood bed, and cried until I fell asleep.

I was awakened, hopeful, hours later, by a text from Lucas. “I’m sorry, dear. My phone wasn’t charging for some reason. I didn’t expect to hear from you today. How are you?”

I waited awhile to respond, staring at the rounded message on the screen and treasuring as much as I could the fact that even after this, after all I’d put him through, he still wanted to talk to me. As long as he would still answer me, even hours late, I could make do.

Six days passed. My lease was terminated, my home dismantled, my belongings boxed and tessellated into every spare corner of my parents' house. I withdrew from school. A bed was reserved for me at a residential treatment facility in Illinois. I was spending at least an hour each day on the phone with counselors, or insurance, or the university. I was happy to. When I was on hold, listening to a spiel about the center's "positive impact in women's lives", I didn't have to think about how fast this all happened.

With my therapist's blessing I spent the night in my college town so I could dance one last time. I ate a Cuban sandwich at the glossy red bar and chatted with the cook. Across the street the lights were already on in the studio; David was teaching private lessons. While I waited for 7:30 to roll around I sat on the orange couch next to the door of the café and sipped lychee juice. I felt comfortable here. I tried fiercely to remain in the moment.

I wore the only long-sleeved shirt I own that is not a sweater. It is one of my favorites, but that night it forced me to recall the new angry scars I concealed. My reflection across the room looked tired. David greeted me with a fondness I was not used to. I didn't know how much Lucas and Michele had told him, or how much I wanted him to know, but I would gratefully accept any affection I could get.

"Hey, Caitlyn," he said, never quite making eye contact.

"Hey." I made myself available for a hug that I did not receive until later.

David's lesson went smoothly. Even with a couple women leading, we didn't have quite an even number, so every few minutes I found myself standing alone, waiting to be rotated back in. I tried to listen, tried to focus on getting better at this dance I loved. If I knew the theory behind the push-and-pull, maybe I wouldn't be so dependent on my leads. Whenever Lucas was

across from me, he gave me a quick hug, and each time I craved more, longer. The yearning was so strong it brought tears to my eyes. I swallowed it down.

“I need stability and clarity,” David said to the group of assembled dancers. “If my partner is unstable, then she’s not going to hear me.”

The lesson adjourned and it was time for the regular dance. I returned to the wall, sat down, and waited for someone to ask me. I imagined the stretch and swing of my favorite patterns, Lucas pulling my arms behind my back and leading me into a spin. I imagined being confident enough to add styling when he gave me a few free beats to do what I wanted, instead of just waiting for his next touch. Embarrassed and without quite knowing why, I finally began to cry.

Lucas texted me between dances as I sat staring unseeing into the dimness of the studio. The bottom ridge of a panel of mirror reflected one of the streetlamps into a perfect rainbow on the floor. I told him I needed to go, and within minutes Lucas was walking me down the street to his new apartment, where he lived alone. A year ago he would have stayed with me. Today I was extravagantly thankful for even this. “Are you going to be okay here?” he asked me.

For a moment I remembered the last time he had left me alone like this, but I couldn’t do that to him again. “I will be, yes.” I waited out the dance on his futon. I fell asleep with the lights on and woke to him in his three-piece suit standing over me.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” he said.

Michele stopped by. I was still half-asleep and I waited until she left. All I wanted was for him to hold me. He had to, I thought. I had been waiting. He sat down next to me with a cup of coffee, and for a moment, I thought he would.

“I need to put together some materials for tomorrow’s study session,” he said instead. “You can take the bed. I hope I don’t keep you up.” He mashed a pillow between his hands, then got up to place it on his bed between the disheveled green sheets.

“You won’t,” I told him, trying to show my sadness but not too much sadness, not enough to manipulate him. I don’t know if he noticed, so it must not have been enough. “Sleeping is my superpower.” I slipped my bra off beneath my clothes and climbed into his bed. I imagined the heft of him next to me, his arms building a completely safe space against his chest. He stood close to the edge of the bed, and, recklessly, I hoped.

Lucas pulled back my hair with a strong dance hand and kissed my scalp. “Sleep well,” he said.

Moments later I heard the creak as he sat down at his computer, the patter of his keyboard.

I cried softly for a while, but he didn’t hear me. Hazily, half-dreaming, I regretted not dancing—if I had been stronger, if I were better, I would have been able to power through, enter into the athletic interplay of independences that I wanted so much to master. And then, I thought on the edge of consciousness as I listened to his quiet, ordinary sounds in the other room, he would have touched me more. Eventually I slept.

On Tuesdays at 2:00 at Timberline Knolls Residential Treatment Center, the women in Group 2 were scheduled for something called DMT. I didn’t know what this was when my new therapist helped me decide which sessions to attend. I lumped it in with the other acronyms, which to me

represented seminars and coping mechanisms, hours of learning things that hadn't helped me. I found out Tuesday morning that DMT stood for Dance Movement Therapy.

Walking across campus in the crisp November air, I was exhausted—my roommate shouted and swore in sleep, gripped with PTSD nightmares. I was lonely and frightened, still so far away from the people I knew, whose voices reached me on the phone maybe every couple of days at pre-determined hours before and after meals. Mostly, though, I was nervous about this dance thing. How would I move my body without a partner, without steps? I didn't want to be forced to choose when to sway my arms, where to put my feet. My shoulders ached for the support of a leader's arms, no matter how much I fought it.

The DMT therapist was a fresh young woman with a purple hoodie tied around her waist; she walked with a grace that told me she could touch her face with her feet. She invited us into a dim basement with smooth, dark floorboards. As I and my ragtag groupmates filtered in, she circled us, making welcoming motions with her bare arms, hugging them across her chest. "Come sit," she said, falling effortlessly onto a cushion, legs crossed. "Let's make a circle. There is no judgment here. This can be emotional, but everyone should just do what they're comfortable with."

"I've been looking forward to this all day," one of the other women said. There were only four, maybe five of us. Most of the group had skipped, forfeiting their full-attendance reward for the day. That's how nervous dance made most of them. I was determined to be braver than that. Still, as I parked myself on a yoga mat, I found that I was shaking.

"We're going to introduce ourselves through a movement," the therapist said. Her voice was calming and mirthful. She turned, arms flowing like a mermaid's, and selected a song on the

screen of her iPod. I recognize the first note, and this perplexed me. It had been so long since I had had access to music. I hadn't realized how much I missed it.

"What?" she asked me.

"I know this one." She smiled. The lyric began:

A new world hangs outside the window...beautiful and strange...

I watched her move her arms outward and then in, fluttering her elbows slowly, as if trying not to startle a skittish animal. She nodded to the woman next to her, who continued the exercise.

I want to touch a human being...I want to go back to sleep...

I don't remember exactly how I introduced myself to the group. I wish I did; I could use it in my West Coast. I also wish I could say DMT was transformative, that I became emotional and reconnected with my body in a new way. It wasn't, at least not at the time, and I didn't. I moved around the room in slow loops to describe how I imagined my journey to this place. When asked to participate in group exercises with other women, little interpretive embraces and curtsies, I did so with an awkwardness similar to my first forays into partner dance almost two years since. Still, there was something comforting about dancing again after so long away from my studio and my friends, after the regretful final night overcome by anxiety. There was something exciting, too, about standing there on my own, touched by no one, with eyes on just me, and extending a flared hand for no reason except that it seemed the thing to do. Because I had to be—because there was no one else—I focused on every detail of my pose, every little twitch of finger and foot, and I wished I could be this self-aware when I danced West Coast Swing.

Sound and color...

On the way out I took advantage of the good floor for a few quick steps: *one two triple-step, four five triple-step*. And I swung myself around the doorframe as from the hand of a lead.

I was treated at Timberline Knolls for two weeks. I returned to DMT every chance I got, relaxing into another dim mirrored space so far from the studio, a new world where my only choice was to be okay on my own. On a chilly Wednesday afternoon in late November I graduated from the program and was released with my therapist's approval. As I walked on precise feet to my parents' car, I tried to carry the loose new rhythm of improvisation with me. I tried to remember the infinite patterns I was capable of at the end of the line. I listened to West Coast music on the highway on the way home, and by early December, I was dancing again.

A young Hispanic couple had come to this West Coast lesson, so half of David's instructions were in broken Spanish. "*Como se dice 'across'?*" he said, my hand held loosely in his. I knew enough to demonstrate the steps slowly, deliberately, whenever he wanted me to. When he spun me out, I knew I still leaned slightly to the side, but I was steady on my feet. I danced with the young man, guided his hand gently up to my shoulder when it rested incorrectly on my hip. I danced with an acquaintance who threw in complicated patterns when David wasn't looking. I danced with David, and when he met my eyes, he was smiling, thrilled by the extra challenge of the bilingual lesson. It felt like we had a secret. "Beautiful," he said, after leading me.

David hurried to his laptop to queue up a song for practice. Familiar bars rose cheerfully from the speaker system—I had been listening to this song during my commute. I knew every curve of the singer's voice, and by the second verse I had joined in:

Something inside me has changed... I was so much younger yesterday.

I sang and followed the movements I was given, and when my lead missed my hand and lost the line of the dance, I shimmied my shoulders and swished my hips and offered an encouraging smile.

Lucas showed up just as the lesson ended, apologetic, and hastily changed shoes, but I danced with him only once it was his job now to mingle and teach, and I was not part of that. Michele arrived even later and I didn't dance with her at all. It was okay. When they met my eyes across the room, they smiled at me, and that was all the love I needed. I danced with David and he grabbed me by the ribs, a ticklish spot, and threw me completely out of it. "Are you okay?"

I was doubled over, trying to regain my balance, giggling hysterically. "No, it's fine I promise. You got me at just the wrong place."

"It's been a while since I've made a woman make that sound," he said, as he took my hands again to resume dancing. I didn't really stop laughing for the rest of the night.

My first night living alone. I was in the wood-paneled living room, hands on hips, surveying the large boxes of dishware I had yet to unpack. My t-shirt and leggings were smeared with dust, sweat, and flakes of brown paper packing material. It was getting dark outside, but the film of the mismatched curtains was flooded with white light.

I sliced the taped-up cardboard with a spread pair of scissors, then took a deep breath. I opened my laptop, pulled up Spotify, waited for the Wi-Fi to connect. In my favorites I found the playlist titled “West Coast.” I turned up the volume.

The soft drumbeat of a favorite song picked up the mood.

I turn tables and speak too softly. I don't make much sense...

I step-step-stepped in my dirty socks to the kitchen's mottled linoleum. I sat back into my firm hips, extending my arms for balance. I found the beat beneath my ribs, resting right where I left it. *One two triple-step triple-step.* I turned past the refrigerator, keeping my shoulders steady, my head high. I stuck the landing. My toe extended past me, elegant, simple. I switched my weight and kept dancing. *Five six triple-step triple-step.* My center of mass was exactly where I wanted it to be. Each movement was exactly how I wanted it to be. Precise. I wobbled from time to time, unsteady in stocking feet, but my balance was quick to recover. If I wanted to, I was free to change the rhythm entirely. Maybe, sort of, I was actively loving me.

It really shouldn't work but it does. It really shouldn't work but it does...

The chorus cradled me. I caught a glimpse of faint pink sunset fading behind the row of identical apartment buildings. I rose up onto the curve of my feet, so much stronger now. Then I returned to the living room and fell to my knees to get things in order.