

AMERICAN DANCES

and other poems

By

Bruce Smith

The Can of Something

A boy scuffs forward as if expelled
from off-stage, hunched, propelled

by want in large attitudes of sorrow for one so small
and returns with small skips and multiple

stylized shrugs miming the stoop sitters
who shing-a-ling and jitter bug

to some unheard radio. He hands over
the silver can of sifted peas to the mother

who spins while standing absolutely still
and the father enters as if uphill

as the ensemble revolves around the table.
Something about it tribal, unappeasable.

The Rumba

A folk dance that evolved by mimicking
the movements performed in working

the late shift at the docks where the stevedores
carry out the lifts unloading ships from Ecuador

that is now perceived as sexual –
the tantric stare, dandling the actual

each ingot and carcass, each bag of sugar
and banana tendered in a lingering hug

measured by dust and a dispatcher
while the mind wanders to other Americas

where sambas of sleep and slams
are done in tandem.

The Middle Class

The dance of dances.

The entire buck and wing done vertically
as if to flee from the dance of the daily

horizontal drag and pull of one yoked
like a mule. There's a Sisyphean joke

to it that escapes the dancer
but enters the agitated manner

of right knee and arm simultaneously raised,
then left, as if in learned church/state praise.

It is an upright waterless crawl
against a currentless windfall

of nothing. Think of a slow horserace
where the man is trotter not pacer

the whole miserable athletic engine
of the human matched against a notion,

a pari-mutuel wager that pays zero
to win, zero to place, zero to show.

The Mail

Elements of long glissading steps
from the tango and the schlep

of the burden of dread and promise
the carrier lugs combine in this feckless

dance with rural origins when the walk
to the mailbox was stomp, shuffle, and kick

the dirt reminiscent of the cotton-eyed Joe
and juba slaps of the thigh and toe

stands to see if what was left
was more than the identity theft

or the abdomen of a wasp.
Knee hinge, passé, hop.

Dancers use the chest lift
from jazz as well as quick turns and catch,

Asian head motions, the demi-plié of defeat
indicating it's not money or good news, sleet-

snow encrusted saunter that was the past
gives way to the vast

undanced interior spaces and a body bent
in half-prayer for the blandishments

passed through the slot that could be spores
or love. Soft shoe, shuffle, doll hop, drop to all fours.

The Sperm

Like The Middle Class, relentlessly looking
for something and like The Rumba coming
to a frenzied climax, working hard
combining ancient rites and avante garde
techniques in an eyeless lash and flail
in which some find insinuations of the sensual
and some find parodies of the zombie movies
of the 50's where the living dead want eternity
in one form or another: presence
or absence, but not this. The turbulence
is political in origin: class struggle,
although others see choirs of angels
cast out of heaven or silvery things
making their way upstream, swimming
to their deaths. It doesn't amount to much.
What's this have to do with getting fucked
standing up? Critics have asked.
There's a sense of anxious, male task
completion to the dance. Wiggle and chug,
helix-like spirals, falling off the log.
So many lost men
and not one asking directions!
The scale seems at once infinitesimal
yet dazzling, in the end astronomical,
causing us to love the world more
while diminishing our desire.

Other Poems

In Your City

Once I thought I was crossed with the currents of America --
a little Euphrates of consciousness. The wires, the countenance,
the eye, the examination, the X all crossed to make much clout

or art that I thought would make a wobble in your culture.
Or could approximate, like scansion, the curving, spawning motion
of a dream. Instead it made slang of my life –

a need -- private, non standard, convenient that I used
to amuse and to rebuff. It was for injury and repair
that I had this voice, when in the morning after I could

fix it by the maximum silence, being either Cain
or Adam, god felon or fucker. I like the quiet
when all the noise from the sirens and the emigrant geese

and the school kids on the street coalesce to break my precious
reverie, here in your city, another sub-rosa dream or crosscurrent
where the watery chaos goddess lives with the dying sky god

who once I thought I saw when I lived in Seattle
and would see it was not inside me and waited
and the waiting was the great thing but not so to say.

Samba De Orpheus

A sob in the body, late August, white time and counter-miracle
to the music on the radio, "Struttin' with some Barbecue,"
the mighty
arpeggios and silent halleluias from our satchelmouthed
hero.

The time crossed like light with something old like the tabernacle
and its illicit opposite that remembers fondly the flavors of
captivity –
the vinegar and sugar and love-poisoned tomato.

Only a voice could join the mercy and the rightful
and it wasn't yours, it was the unearthly
singer from the dirty south, who had the moan

that was your mother's ash-hauling eye roll
and your fathers' speaking in tongues. The authority
of the voice was burn for burn, word for word ratio

that meant we could remember the shackles
and the foreskin of the heart removed and be ready
for the call through the scat and the bruised tempos

where everyone heard something and was enthralled.
Everyone was a girl or a boy at school, fidgety,
and then comes the nudge, the unh, and the ecstasy, O

then the season had an angel
clearing his throat and your shitty little history
was okay, somehow, was solo after solo.

What Are They Doing in the Next Room?

Are they unsaying everything?
Are they between the soul and a star?
Are they taking an ice pick to being?
Are they making a beautiful disaster?

Will they grow tired of their voices?
Will they see the shadow of there is
set and rise as something that rejoices
or the being that begins the heresy?

Will this be the final deposition
as one speaks of deposing the king?
Are they reading the Kama Sutra for positions?
Can the body be whipped until it sings?

The television derives the half-full hours.
Time exits as mostly what's to come.
Losing also is ours
I meant that as a question.

Is the "I" the insomniac's question?
Somewhere between anxiety and other?
Somewhere between oblivion and moon?
Is the mirror a sister or a brother?

Or the mother of the rupture
of knowing I'm alone?
Is to be to live without doors
or windows beside the beige telephone?

Are they intransitive or transitive?
The fucking or the fucked?

The flight or the fugitive?
The Paris or what's abducted?

Can they give themselves the sun and sky?
Can they give themselves the infinite?
Or just the torment of the why?
Can they swap more than spit?

Is nothing like their mystery?
Is the ice machine their dream?
Is it for this I give my testimony?
Is love the silence or the scream?

Do they invent my secrecy
as I invent their faces?
Is desire knowing or not knowing glory?
Can it happen in on of these places?

If not, then can the glass I hold against the wall
be my dram of shame or my responsibility
for the guilt of all
or what is beyond me?

Letter From Lewisberg Federal Penitentiary

I have so little time to speak to you,
and yet I have ten minus two

years off for good behavior left on the sentence,
so forever. It feels urgent and suspended

to be here: a laundered moonscape
painted with antiseptic and rape

and noise and crimes we love
to tell ourselves, to feel. We feel *of*

not in the world, which is how we felt
when we walked and the world melted

by our rage into waxy splotches of color –
it was the drugs talkin' – and the horror

of memory when the drugs got quiet.
I talk as if I had infinite

time. That's how dumb I am,
but not stupid. I signed up for program.

It was either art or god.
I took art because god

was an ex-con's absolution for my sins
and I did not want to be forgiven.

So I copied stuff: the beautiful, although most cons
were drawing angels with big tits or dragons

which is coked-up tattoo art without the rush.
I wanted to get to it, to brush

the violence into submission
like petting the mane of a lion.

OK, I think in confined ways
(I'm confined) when want I want to say

is I know how I got here
and sorry and the line I draw on paper

is the rent in the veil
and towards you my tunnel.

November

Eligible for the Holocaust, eligible for the draft,
eligible for the necklace of tires on fire,
eligible for the crucifixion, the child, the kingdom

and the colossal deals made to escape the ashy epitaph,
the fragging in the Asian rain – my rank higher
than the grunts – by nature of my education

which I curse as I curse the nails on behalf
of the hammer and the desire
on the part of the soft (unworked) flesh of my palms

to be martyr if not savior. There is witchcraft
in the sign – cauldron of spells and St. Elmo's fire,
St. Vitus Dance, the severed limbs, the mind/body problem –

potions brewed against dread. Seraphs
of the gardens, geese flying low across the twilight waters
of the Carolinas: that's art according to Jessie Helms,

oil paintings of bodies of water as cenotaphs
of white men inverted but not unlike I
that looked out of the mirror at the phenomenon

of history and ecstasy that's the staff
for the pitches of wish and weather –
partly cloudy, scattered darkness in the continuum

as the election approaches like an aircraft
approaches the runway, on fire
My survival is my doom.