

The Conga Line

Lewis Warsh

It would seem that I was holding
your hips from behind & that you were
swaying to the music which was
coming from the other room. The
door to the room was open
but no one was entering or leaving.
It was the type of party where people
drifted in, stayed for a few minutes
or a few hours, & then went home.
I had the feeling that I was already
home & that I was holding onto your hips
from behind as we danced around the
room with our eyes closed, bumping
into the furniture while the music
played on. Then someone caught me
from behind & held onto my hips with
hands that resembled claws. I could
feel his breath on the back of my neck
as we circled around the room. There
was someone in front of you, an old man,
your hands on his hips, & as far as I knew
there was someone in front of him,
a young woman with hair down to her waist,
& that he was holding onto her waist
with his withered hands, & that there
was someone in front of her as the line
of dancers snaked around the room
& onto the balcony where the moon was
shining on the tops of the trees in the garden
& you could hear the sea in the distance,
the foghorns that seemed part of the music,
a new instrument, woodwind or strings,
you could hear the voices of the people
singing in time to the music, as if they
had migrated from another planet
& were trying to get the most out of the
pleasures of the new world
in which they had landed almost
at random out of every possible place
in the universe. It's a pleasure to dance,
as much as it's also a pleasure

to stand on the sidelines
 & observe the bodies of the people
 on the dance floor without feeling envious
 or sad, as if something happened
 when you were a child to make
 you act the way you are now, so whenever
 anyone asks you to dance you shake your head,
 pretend you're too drunk or tired,
 without ever measuring the potential pleasure
 of putting your arms around a stranger & leading
 him or her across a dance floor, or in the case
 of the conga line actually pressing your whole
 body into the back of another person,
 as if you were fucking that person from behind,
 for instance, as some people like to pretend
 they're doing while they dance,
 as if the idea of dancing wasn't far removed
 from sex, that it was like a kind of prelude to going
 to bed with someone--& that this was the
 possibility you were denying yourself,
 so well-versed were you in the art of denial
 you never realized that you were cashing
 in your chips before the game even began,
 spreading your cards on the table in the shape of a fan
 so that one card partially obscured the one behind it,
 as if the other players were supposed to be impressed
 by your fucking hand (two pairs, I hate to tell you,
 won't get you shit in this world).

It was late in the day for dancing, or anything else,
 & there were shouts of 'man overboard'
 from the boat on the horizon, but it wasn't you
 sinking fast or flailing your arms
 above the water, while the sharks circled around you,
 & the music was just a humming now from the
 depths of space, from the eerie corridor
 between the moon & the sun & the rest of the planets
 had collided with the stars which were shrinking
 inside their own mini-universes,
 showering sparks & embers out into the receding
 hairline of the entire astronomical chart
 as much as we're able to understand of whatever's out there
 while taking into account all the worlds beyond this one
 that no one knows about but which are like shadows
 of the world as it exists today, the shadow of the body
 of the stranger as he hovers above your bed,
 the shadow of the lamp on the desk
 looming on the ceiling, like a third hand,

all the gestures of love, warmth & friendship
that mean nothing & everything,
the hands on your waist as you circle the room
& the other hands making shadows
on the bedroom wall, the shadows
of the past looming like a gargoyle
above your head,

mouth twisted out of shape, coarse hair
hanging limp over weather-beaten face,
underpants with small red valentines,
crooked teeth.