Swinging Out of Writing: On Balancing Rhymes and Rock Steps

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I have called myself a writer for nearly all my life. Diary entries, short stories, and poetry began dancing their way into my notebooks since I learned how to spell. Throughout high school, I read voraciously, submitted to literary magazines, and wrote nearly everything down. I expected to always easily sustain myself, as Major Jackson beautifully put it in his poem "Why I Write Poetry," on a "steady diet of words."[1]

1. Major Jackon, "Why I Write Poetry," in *Best American Poetry 2013* (N.p.: Scribner, 2013), 59.

I discovered swing dancing much later on, during my first week of college two Octobers ago. A social dance from the 1920s that is danced to jazz music, swing includes dance styles such as Lindy Hop, Charleston, Balboa, and Collegiate Shag. On the blank page

Don't we look unique, darling?

of the dance floor, a leader and a follower can improvise an entire dance simply through partner connection. In the beautiful, neo-gothic Ida Noyes Hall on campus, I caught the jitterbug in a frenzy of flying feet, friendly dancers, and big band jazz, and have been swing dancing ever since.

Zadie Smith published a piece in *The Guardian* last October titled "Dance Lessons for Writers," in which she describes the connections between dancing and writing. Both offer "lessons of position, attitude, rhythm and style, some of them obvious, some indirect." Smith distinguishes between the dance styles of Fred Astaire ("untethered, free-floating") and Gene Kelly ("grounded, firmly planted") to point out how she usually has to choose between elevated and commonsense language when writing. She also compares dancers like Janet Jackson, Madonna, and Beyoncé to writers like Muriel Spark, Joan Didion, and Jane Austen who "inspire similar devotion" through "total control"[2]—dancers mesmerize crowds with fancy footwork, while writers capture readers with striking language. Both art forms give us an audience to which we present, sometimes boldly and other times with great vulnerability, our personal style.

2. Zadie Smith, "Zadie Smith: Dance Lessons for Writers," *The Guardian* (29 Oct 2016).

But when I fell in love with swing dancing, I did not think about how dancing and writing intersect in terms of lessons (although this influence certainly exists—I've written poems using meters that match the six and eight-count rhythms of swing). Rather, I thought about dancing as a distraction *from* writing. In an interview with *The Millions*, poet April Bernard called poetry a dance. This is a metaphor I can understand: diction, like footwork, can be light and acrobatic, while the way a poem reads, like the way a dancer moves, can be smooth or erratic. But I could not hold writing and dance together.

This essay began as a response to the age-old feeling of writers' guilt: the nagging sense that I should be, but have not been, producing creative, written work seriously on a routinely basis. For me, my guilt culminated in the almost unbelievable realization that, instead of spending my free time devoted to reading and writing, I was… swing dancing.

SWINGING OUT OF WRITING

My mother once commented that I seldom keep still these days, for my feet start shuffling whenever a jazzy tune plays in a department store. Dancing has made me, someone who used to be content staying in the same spot for hours with a book, restless. Yet this is dangerous—for in order to write, I must sit down and focus. For some writers, music helps; Haruki Murakami told the *Paris Review* that he considers "the chords, the melodies, the rhythm, the feeling of the blues" helpful when he writes.[3] When I write, however, jazz is a distraction. I cannot compose lines in iambic pentameter if eight-count rhythms are lodged in my head. As the time I spent dancing (or even thinking about dancing) overtook the time I spent writing, a dilemma began to present itself: would I rather stay in my pajamas in bed, trying to write trochaic verse, or dress up and triple step? Too often, I have chosen the latter, heading out the door with a book and dance shoes in my bag, barely getting through a couple of pages on the train yet swiveling, shuffling, and hopping in my well-worn shoes for hours into the night.

3. Haruki Murakami, *The Paris Review Interviews, IV* (N.p.: Picador, 2009), ed. Picador USA Staff and The Paris Review, 366.

My priorities became even more pronounced back home in Hong Kong last summer, when I had to choose between going to the weekly social dance and poetry open mic, both of which took place on Wednesday night. A fifteen-minute walk separated the two venues; theoretically, I could have swung by both if I made the effort. But this compromise involved attending the open mic first, missing a chunk of swing, and buying drinks twice. Choosing one was more time and cost-efficient. That summer, I did not attend a single open mic night.

Should I have felt guilty about my decision? I didn't ask myself that question until I was on a plane ride back to Chicago in late September. I can't say I regretted much—I met kind dancers, collected a wealth of new swing era songs, and improved at leading swingouts. But I could not shake the feeling that I should have spent more time writing and reading like a "responsible" writer would. I should have been collecting lines from novels, not new moves from the dance floor. Swing dancing was a hobby, while writing was supposed to be a lifestyle, a potential career path. Dancing slacked my writing muscle as my body muscles instead grew accustomed to tracing the steps of a swingout, maintaining the close partner

I have to go to my *next* dance at 3am, sorry!

connection of Balboa, keeping my lead arm up while dancing Collegiate Shag. I was swinging out on a weekly basis and, in doing so, swinging out of writing.

After all, swing dancing—unlike writing—is a social activity at heart. One becomes a better writer by reading widely, an activity most properly done in solitude. Conversely, one becomes a better dancer by going out to social dances and festivals. Susan Sontag wrote that being a writer "demands a going inward and reclusiveness, just plain reclusiveness—not going out—staying home all the time—not going out with everybody else going to play." The writing life involves tasks that require solitude, such as describing personal memories and composing sentences. But social dancing is about making diverse connection points, collaborating with different people's ideas to lead or follow a dance. Instead of fully living the solitary "book-drunken life"[4] that Sontag credits for turning her into a writer, I spent my weekends happily and, with other dancers, collectively "swungover."[5]

The disparities between writing and dancing most sharply emerged for me toward the end of last year, when I was living parallel yet double lives with both crafts. I was enrolled in a poetry workshop, experimenting with various poetic forms and working on

4. Susan Sontag, "The Project of Literature," sourced from Maria Popova's blog *Brain Pickings*.

5. Term borrowed from the swing dancer Bobby White's blog, *Swungover*.

a new poem almost every day. I was also dancing every weekend at the Java Jive, the social dance hosted by the university's swing dance club, and attended my first swing workshop in late November. I fell into a regular routine that quarter: every Saturday night, I would dance for almost three hours, and every Monday afternoon, I would upload a poem I had written that week to be workshopped in class the following Thursday. My days were measured in dances and poems.

The poetry and dance workshops I took part in, although nourishing, nonetheless divided my time and belonged to different lifestyles. When writers gather to workshop their writing, they critique one another's work in order to later revise it independently, perhaps well into the night. Yet when swing dancers converge for workshops, they look forward to the social dances that extend past midnight. Offering someone critique on the social dance floor is usually considered poor dance etiquette. Gabriel García Márquez once said, "when I sit down to write, which is the essential moment in my life, I am completely alone." But the magic of swing dancing happens with a partner—the conversation between a leader and follower, the familiar ways you can respond to a stranger on the dance floor.

I certainly find it easier to dance than to write. When revising my final portfolio for my poetry workshop, I felt exhausted after an hour of writing, worn out by fixing a broken meter. Strangely, writing seemed a more strenuous activity than what I had done two weeks earlier—dance almost non-stop from 9:00 AM to 3:30 AM. "Dance is a body's refusal / to die," writes Cathy Linh Che in the July/August issue of *Poetry*. When dancing, you have your partner's stamina, the pulse of the music, and the energy of the dance floor to sustain you. You offer and receive happiness, swinging your partner out and being swung out yourself. But Che concludes her poem describing "pleas" that are "looped in writing, / the stutter of a body's / broken grammar."[6] Poetry can be particularly adept at accessing the dark, troubling, and intensely personal past in ways that emotionally exhaust the writer, travelling alone in their endeavor. Writing means investing much of your own energy into your own work. Seldom does someone complete a rhyming couplet for you the way dance

6. Cathy Linh Che, "I Walked through the Trees, Mourning," in *Poetry Magazine* (July/August 2017).

partners can simultaneously and immediately snap fingers during a Minnie Dip at a break in a song.

At a workshop, swing dancer Daniel Repsch described swing as a "chill dance." Writing is decidedly less "chill"—I begin every dance feeling more surefooted about my rock step than I do about writing the opening sentence of a short story, and I could have completed a thousand swingouts in the time it took for me to think of how to end the last poem I wrote. Form is vital to every poem I write; the sestina, sonnet, ghazal, and other styles put constraints on meter, diction, and rhyme, making me more anxious than ever to choose the best words for my poem. No such belaboring is possible in a social dance, when the length of a song decides the time you get for one dance. Unless you are choreographing a routine, there is seldom a sense of revision present in swing dancing; if you miss the only break in the song, you miss it, and carry on until the song ends. Music also helpfully inspires movement, whereas the blank page stares up at me, unhelpful and unblinking. Swing dancing liberates me from the burdens of perfection that haunt me when I write.

But I am drawn to dancing for reasons that extend beyond the simple fact that social dancing is more enjoyable than writing, which more often seems like serious, stagnant work. All the poems I have written are based on what I know—myself, my family, my history. As such, writing is studying my reflection. As Seamus Heaney once said, "I write to see myself, to set the darkness echoing."[7] But dancing showed me new features of my own reflection that I had never seen before. Swing was nourishment and growth. I brought to the dance floor a sense of humor and willingness to improvise that I had never seen in my writing. Writing was introspective, swing dancing was exploratory. Writing kept me in my room, dancing took me downtown. Writing made me still; dancing made me move. What began as a newfound hobby rewrote my life in more ways than I could have expected.

7. Seamus Heaney, "Personal Helicon," in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2000), 14.

Yet I could never dance away from writing completely. Swing dancer Jerry Almonte wrote on his blog, *Wandering & Pondering*, that Lindy Hop is "not an escape. It's just another way of experiencing the world."[8] And writing is ultimately how I unpack every experience I have. Dancing the Lindy Hop is one heck of an experience, as is

8. Jerry S Almonte, "Favorite Videos and Parting Thoughts on 2012," from his blog *Wandering & Pondering*.

waking up to snow, revisiting my childhood home, and watching a familiar city disappear below me from a plane. Writing allows me to look at these moments squarely in the face and study them with silence, pause, and discipline. Dancing with a stranger, forming a connection, and playing with their momentum in response to live music is wonderfully intimate, but the intimacy of a poetry reading—which exposes me to a stranger's hopes, joys, and frustrations—sends reverbs through me in ways that dancing cannot. What I love most about poetry is the power of words to move you, even when you are not moving.

Despite the solitude of the writing life, it is also true that, as Anne Lamott notes, writing gives you "a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again."[9] Frankie Manning described dancing as a two and a half minute-long love affair between a dancer, their partner, and the music. Writing feels like the opposite—"I hate writing," Dorothy Parker once said. But the second part of Parker's quote is, "I love having written." Time, of course, is essential to my dilemma, the reason why my dance and writing lifestyles compete, and also why dance so frequently wins: although both dancing and writing are hard work, a dance can make me smile within seconds, while a poem might take days, weeks, and sometimes not at all. Yet while writing is not always immediately enjoyable, the way dancing usually is for me, a completed poem (if ever) is a reward that has its belated, and often immense, pleasures.

9. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor, 1995), 237.

Zadie Smith wrote about dance lessons for writers and there are certainly writing lessons for dancers, ways in which both art forms move in tandem. Swing dancers could learn a thing or two from Hemingway, whose unadorned yet clear prose teaches us not to overuse variations or lead complex moves that might confuse our partner. Similarly, dancers should pay as much attention to music breaks as poets do to line breaks; these are moments in our craft where we show that we are listening to the music, thinking about what precedes and follows a phrase. Anne Lamott also notes that "to be a good writer, you not only have to write a great deal but you have to care."[10] What makes a poem or novel important, and not only well-written, is the problems they set out to address and

10. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 107.

The newest dance move: the Goose

the conversations they hope to inspire among readers. Swing dancers, who spend most of their time on the dance floor physically connected to another human being, especially need to care.

My favorite essay about swing dancing is Bobby White's "The Listening Leader,"[11] in which he writes about the importance of leaders paying attention to their follower's variations, personality, and mechanics during a dance. Listening and responding is what makes partnered dancing a conversation, instead of a soliloquy. White also emphasized taking your partner's physical and psychological comfort into account—to be kind. To care. In the years to come, I will write poems I'm happy with, have delightful dances, abandon stories I find hopeless, and have frustrating moments on the dance floor. And just as one's writing style evolves, or the plot of a novel takes unexpected turns, my relationship with dance will certainly change. But as a writer, I will always try to produce a good piece of writing that moves people; as a dancer, I will always want to dance well and know that people enjoy moving with me.

11. Bobby White, "The Listening Leader," published in *Swungover*.

This August, I attended my second weekend-long dance event: the "Great Lakes Balboa Escape" in Chicago. I had, of course, writing I wanted to complete over the weekend, and ideas for poems I had been tossing around in my head all summer, but I nonetheless put them on hold as I practiced Balboa toss outs instead. On the last morning of classes, Andreas Olsson and Olga Marina showed us how scatting aloud can be a helpful way of keeping musical rhythms in mind while you dance. *Shoo-ga-shoo-ba-da, shoo-ha-shoo-ba-da.* Andreas's voice overlapped with the slow rhythms of the music playing in the background as he and Olga shuffled across the floor, demonstrating the footwork and figures of slow balboa. It sounded like poetry.