

NANCY VIEIRA COUTO

*The Skate*

Crossing the Delaware  
Christmas, 1838

What she has gotten herself into is a boat  
full of women terrified of shimmying  
over the wrong state of the right element,  
the sailors who will push them half enjoying  
the crush of flounces, the loosely corseted

hysteria, as they surround the craft  
and bump it off the ice-caked Jersey bank  
and skate it on its keel across the frozen  
surface, whose pocks and fissures and  
upthrusts simulate, at first,

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

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

gone from the counted cross-stitch of their souls,  
and they are skating, and they are suddenly  
shy with one another, widows, wives,  
and virgins averting dreamy gazes,  
geranium cheeks, curly wisps escaping

from under hoods and bonnets, and she,  
most of all, is shy as she skates  
the unconfessed glissades of her insatiable  
desire. There is only this  
skate of a boat in motion, and motion,

and the physicality of motion,  
this space for it, this current gone glaze  
separating “here” from *here*. Meanwhile, the  
gentlemen are hoofing it. Such a  
vaudeville of tentative thrusts with sticks

and umbrellas, such steps, missteps, and dust-  
me-ups! At last safe on land, they muster  
wagons and make their way by Front Street,  
the ladies squared as boxes and as mum  
as if nothing had happened.