

Change Partners and Dance · *Allison Joseph*

You will never write the perfect poem.
It will remain inside, a slow boat,

a shimmering absolute that turns
uncertain and recalcitrant in the brain,

growing ungainly as you set
it to paper—going lank, loose,

cowardly—a succession of phrases
you couldn't honor on your best day.

Forget it. Forget the drag and claim
of what will not yield, what stays heavy

as millstone, constricting
as tourniquet. Sit, instead, ruthless,

eager, pushing at boundaries,
at junctions of synapses,

giving names to limits,
to hesitations, to the breakneck

stutter of your human voice.
Language didn't ask for you,

isn't waiting for you to carve it solid,
to hack away until there's nothing

but truth, the heft and weight of it
all you can offer up, send forth.

There are no prizes,
no tests of pure worth,

nothing but you and this passion,
an incredulous secret wonder

that cons you every day, a wink
and a smile, a sideways shuffle

that swears you know the steps
as something syncopated and Latin

rises from the orchestra, and Fred
arrives in a slick tux, Ginger in a gown

that fans out and out, trailing sequins,
lace, delicate and coquettish feathers.