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 **Between Chaos and Light: Calvin, Card Playing, Comic Books, Sex, God, and Dancing**

Mary Lane Potter

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Between Chaos and Light:  
Calvin, Card Playing, Comic Books, Sex, God, and Dancing**

*Mary Lane Potter (bio)*

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I was born for dancing, into a Calvinist community that outlawed dancing.

This sounds like a story of belonging. But it's not. I'm not interested in pitting society against the individual or glorifying the artist as rebel. Though I admire Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* for its rendering of the conflict between tradition and the individual, religion and art, that's not what I'm after here. I'm no rebel, no artist—more a wondering spirit, eager to taste and see that the world is good. I'm also not interested in bashing John Calvin for banning dancing in Geneva as part of his campaign against the libertines and their love of all dissolute pleasures. I'm no Calvin hater. I'm one of Calvin's few admirers—a gargantuan task in an age when Calvin figures as a favorite whipping boy for intellectuals and people on the street alike. Total depravity? Anathema to liberals. Double predestination? Heresy to the New Age law of attraction: Manifest your desires! And then there's the matter of burning Michael Servetus at the stake for denying the trinity and infant baptism—offensive to a host of sensibilities and stances. No, I do not rail against Calvin, or Calvinism, as the Great Repressor who did not permit me to dance. I'm after something different here.

What I want is to understand what dancing *is*. What kind of act is it? Physical? Symbolic? Secular? Spiritual? What makes dancing necessary to my existence? What does it *do* in my life, for my life, that I cannot live without? That's my inquiry. And it's pursuing these questions that leads me into the experience of growing up a dancer in an anti-dancing community, formed by the clash of two commands.

## 1. FLOWING

“Dance!” a voice commanded. “Dance,” I heard, whenever a joy so profound overtook me I felt as if I could not bear it. Before there was I and Not-I, before language was mine, the urging was there, neither inside nor outside me, just there, suddenly, rousing my spirit-flesh—wordless, insistent, irrepressible, undeniable. When the sun warmed my bared belly or lips brushed the fine hairs on the crown of my head. Once self and words had emerged, I heard it **[End Page 78]** still: “Dance!”

When I was swimming in Lake Michigan or the Atlantic Ocean. When I sat on a branch in our maple tree and watched the light and shadow playing through the trembling leaves. When I picked up a twig and it crawled across my palm—the wonder of a stick that was alive! When I was singing with the congregation in church, my sister’s voice resonating with mine. When childhood left me, the voice did not. “Dance!” it whispered. When I heard John Coltrane playing “Welcome,” or a choir singing Handel’s *Messiah* in a cathedral, or a stream rushing over rocks. Backpacking through forested mountains. Standing on a cliff gazing at the ocean. Gazing into the face of my newborn son, the face of my newborn daughter. Meditating. Whenever joy threatens to shatter this earthen vessel, “Dance!” a voice says. And I do, quite without willing it, as if my body had a fail-safe mechanism. In those moments, all my cells straining with the pressure, eager to explode, I am, suddenly, without thinking, without willing, dancing. Not on the ground or any surface. In space, in the dark, among the stars, moving freely, in every direction. No up. No down. No East, West, North, or South. No in, no out. No origin or destination. No pattern and variation. No here or there. Just moving, freely, moving in joy, out of joy, into joy. Spinning, leaping, jumping, tumbling, whirling, whirling, whirling with the music of the spheres. And when I have danced the joy into a bearable state, I return to the earth, my body holding the joy for a glorious moment, until it dissipates and I am clay once again, breathing, moving, animated—but no longer enspirited.

## 2. STACCATO

“Don...

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