

The Dances

by Philip F. Clark

The soup was sometimes sparse -- not
the making of it -- not the leavening
of our house with the oven's gradual fire.

Eating was done mostly in silence,
not for a lack of words but for the
grateful sound of mouths being fed.

Days were not always filled with
many things to do, so we filled them
with things we imagined.

She often sat with her thoughts,
our mother -- and given time she would
begin to tell us things. We'd wait

and patiently listen for those
incandescent secrets she would
pepper in: The sister who ran away,

the brother-in-law who shot his
wife, he child from another marriage.
Those parsed bits of the family tree

strewn across years. We were grateful;
we grew and were soon telling our own.
"One time," she'd say -- and our

eyes would light up. Neighbors
were kind, knowing our common
griefs. They had attended all of them.

She used to dance quite a bit
it was said, and I faintly remember
a dress she wore, and black heels.

"Your father was slow," she laughed,
"I was always leading," and so we could
see them both there, on the ballroom

floor -- my mother spinning, my
father trying to get out of the way.
The dresses, the colors, the lights,

men in ties sweated to their waists,
music like a gambit in the night, starting
the next hour, and the next,

when soon, quiet and one by one,
the dancers left the floor, and rooms
would warm in other years.

