

Alison Townsend

AND STILL THE MUSIC

(in memory of Josie Avery, 1953-2003)

One month after your death,
and I'm doing my every-other-day-when-I-don't-run workout
at Curves for Women – Stoughton, Wisconsin's
equivalent of a gym – where I've already
won a "Curves buck" for guessing tonight's
trivia question, and the big news
is that the local Wal-mart won the best
"hometown store" award, and the ladies –
as they call us here – are sweating and panting
their way through the circle of machines
when "Great Balls of Fire" comes on
and damn, if you aren't right there before me,
the slit between worlds opening and closing
like an elevator door as I hustle
from the pec-deck to the recovery pad,
and for just a second, for a breathless,
high-stepping, hip-swaying, triple beat
second, I see you, dressed in that vintage
purple lace you wore to a dance in college
thirty years ago, waving a rhinestone
cigarette holder, your arms open, your mouth
red and alive, startling me so I almost stop,
until I see that if I hesitate, you fade
and that to keep you here I have
to keep moving because you never
sat any dance out; and so I do,
powering my way through the leg press,
the oblique twist and the knee squat,
until my muscles burn, moving my arms
in and out, up and down, running non-stop
on the pads, singing under my breath
with the music, which somehow becomes
"R-E-S-P-E-C-T" and then "Great Balls of Fire"
again, and every good dance song that dumb band
called Widespread Depression played, the sweat
pouring down my face as I dance with you
in this room full of middle-aged women
trying to stop time or at least hold it at bay,
and who wouldn't cry? as I dance with you,
as if my good heart and lungs could somehow

bring you back – breathing life into you the way
the heart-and-lung machine could not – in this room
where you both are and are not, and the music
keeps going, and I remember you twirling once
as a dance and saying, *I'm happy, so happy*, as if
you could have died then – and still the music
carries us, and tears splash down my arm
for the girls we were together and the women we became,
for the empty place on every dance floor without you.