CHLOE MARTINEZ

Woman Dancing

—“Plaque with a Dancer and a Vina Player,” Shunga period, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

I don’t know her name. Call her fist-in-the-air. Call her dancing-so-hard-she-might-fall. Call her doesn’t-care. The guy with the vina is playing all-out, you can tell by the way his sculpted hand almost blurs, the two of them making their little terracotta square sweat and rattle, they’re busting out of the frame and the whole thing might just fall down or burst into flame. I don’t know her name but call her Specific Real Woman in the Year Fifty-Seven BCE. I can’t hear the music, don’t know if she danced as a queen—as one caption claims—or if she went home hungry after the music stopped, washed the pots, thought about giving it all up, maybe going monastic for a while. I go to the foot of a tree and think, “Ah, happiness,” writes the nun in the Therigatha—but that was ancient history by the time Woman Dancing moved like pure human joy, her ornaments rattling or shining in the light. Was it night? What could it have been but the moon? Look at her eyes, even behind this plexiglass in the quiet spotlight of distant, dusty Gallery #253—like your own in the photo you found at the back of a drawer, the one from your best, worst, youngest year: they’re shining. There’s a distant fire in there.