1993

A coming together of hands

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A coming together of hands

by

Ann Elizabeth Elz

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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MASTER OF ARTS

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1993
This collection is dedicated to the women who have taught me to handle adversity with strength and grace, particularly Deborah M. Elz, Charlene Yowell, Elizabeth Duplisea, Elizabeth M. Cooke, and Jennifer E. Miskel.
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Words

I have never owned you.
You always ran out of my mouth
just as my tongue curled to scrape you
off the roof where you had taken lodging—
tantalizing my taste buds with
how it would feel to roll you,
shake you— inside the caverns of my cheeks.

Once outside, you'd return to the page
and dance in circles around the U's,
cooing as I spat on the page
trying to make your dark forms stay—
stay where you belonged.

When I was eight, I conquered you
in the beach sand with my eyes closed.
I tasted the salty, black angles of letters
as I drank the B, P, D
sand lettered drink.

The sweet liquor seeped into my veins,
flooding them with a spring of meaning.
Slipping off my tongue in licorice kisses,
letters swam with the incoming tide.
Screeching overhead, a gull
warned of the waves breaking—
erasing letters.

Eyes opened—
sand cluttered—
letters were lying
on top of and through each other—
debris from a flood.
PART 1: ANGEL WINGS
Prayers
So long as the wicked are in my presence ... let me know my end.

My mother is reading God in the living room.
She doesn't see us anymore—
We are full of sin and unwilling to repent,
So she communes with God and prays for us.

She smashed the creche on the piano.
Idols.
My father brought her soapy water and bandages,
But she rejected the gifts of a pagan,
So her hands bled into the crushed velvet chair.

My mother is begging God in the living room
To save her from the heathens.
Palms pressed together she points to the ceiling
And repeats, "The Lord loves those who hate evil.
Light dawns for the righteous."
Until the scars on the backs of her hands turn white.

She substituted Manischewitz for the sacrament wine,
And watched as Christians choked on the blood of Jews.
With a second glass, she toasted my father,
Who sang the Messiah still tasting the bitterness.

My mother is writing God in the living room.
With her scarred and stiff hands,
She records her pain
Of not being able to save our souls.
She calls us, "the sinners unwilling to repent."

She went to Israel to the Wailing Wall
And beat her fists bloody on the ancient rubble.
She lived in a kibbutz studying the haftarah
To become a Jew.
As she named the Lost Tribes of Israel,
She called out my father's name and said the Kaddish.
Dancing

I hear ants tunneling through your marrow,
eating the fatty cells
and drinking the crimson wine,
building tumors in your bones,
leaving thin stalactites.

Crawling up the spine,
they chew the cartilage and relish the soft marrow.
While they dance on your spinal cord,
you writhe in bed, losing control of your bowels,
and you dream of dance floors
living and breathing with ants.

Across your skull they chew and digest
the delicacy of cranial blood-rich marrow.
Breaking through, they travel the rivers of pink coil,
building nests in the folds, soft and warm.

The sound of my voice
washes over you like waves—
disappearing before you've grasped the meaning.
Hourly pills send my face out of reach,
and you invite the ants to keep dancing and eating.
He Was Once Prayed For By Nuns

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, my grandfather is not Catholic.
In fact, we've never discussed what he is—only what he is not, and he is not Catholic.
He signed away his religion when he married, but he was never baptized by the priest.
He raised my mother Catholic—taught her to cross herself and curtsy when entering the sanctuary.
He helped her memorize the Stations of the Cross.
Growing up in Maine is to be French and Catholic, or French and lost. Lost in the clanging bells calling believers to mass. He'd leave her at the curb on Sundays and go have coffee. Hail Mary and Our Father, on the Rosary I pray for you to protect my grandfather's soul.

Since my mother was dead and my father was running the hotel, the nuns took me in during the day and called on the saints to watch over me at night. The priest spoke in Latin and translated to French, and the nuns showed me how to cross myself with each amen.

My father saw me saying my bedtime prayers and yelled 'I ain't raisin' no Catholic.' So, he took me to the Methodist Church on Sundays. And when they'd pray, I'd recite the Rosary.

My father wasn't the type of man who'd let Catholics take my soul away. He took me to the Baptists in the next town on Thursdays for prayer meeting and Sundays for church. At a revival, my father pushed me to the preacher, 'Save this sinner, oh, Lord. Save hi.' the preacher yelled.

When I married your grandmother, my father said: 'You marry one of them — them Catholics — and you is a not mine no more.' I went right to Saint Peter's and signed the paper saying all future children would be Catholics. They are, even though I never became one myself.

Yesterday, the nurse wouldn't allow me to drink water. She said I'd have to wait until after the test. My skin and mouth were parched from chemicals burning their way through my cells. A minister on his rounds came in and said, 'As God gave water to those fleeing Egypt, he will also give it to you. For if you believe, you shall never be abandoned in a desert.' But the nurse still wouldn't give me water.
Holy Mother, my grandfather
was once prayed for by nuns, and I believe
the sand on the river bottom couldn't have washed away
all the crosses his hands made. Hail Mary full of Grace,
with thy son's death, forgive, and find my grandfather.
The Note Attached to the Fruit Basket Says: "We'll see you soon."

But there is no we,
there is only an I,
and the eyes of the dead
looking up out of the grave in Bangor
where the frost is solid.
The grave chipped in March is uneven
and coarse, like the dugout canoe
made in the summer's heat
that sunk into the compost of mud and leaves
at the bottom of the pond.
Grass won't grow over the grave
until August, and the flowers wired to wreaths
drop petals of "I love you.
I love you not."

The we now lives alone in a house,
brown with antiques,
where a gallon of milk in the icebox
lasts longer than a week
and closets bulge with summer clothes
needed not by the owner but the inheritor,
who smells the green plaid shirt before going to bed.

Over the phone and in letters,
the we of fifty-two years is alive
planting iris and pruning roses,
sweeping winter sand from the driveway,
and preparing for me to come home—
to visit and drive the we, who lives in the house,
to the we in Bangor.
Heart Murmurs
for Eric

Your heart tries to teach mine
the beat it's forgotten. One, two,
Ba—bump counts through your hand
holding mine. One, two, Ba—bump
counts out steady from your heart
singing to mine the rhythm
it's dropped. Ba—bump
Ba—bump. The blood pulses
through your heart whispering to mine
the code I've misplaced. My heart answers
on the electrocardiogram screen Ba—bump—
tha Ba—bump—tha
as blood leaks back into the left ventricle.
Your hands rub my chest where the sensors were glued,
but the red marks don't disappear.
They stay with the Ba—bump—tha
of my heart Ba—bump—tha. You listen
to the mutated beat. Your hand holds mine tighter,
pressing its heartbeat into my palm,
begging it to translate to my heart
the Ba—bump Ba—bump of your healthy heart.
My fingers answer with
Ba—bump
Ba—bump—tha.
Vibrato

The white sheet drawn to his chin
hides the electric probes
sending impulses
across the green screen—
waves never reaching the shore.

Slowly his mind leaves off concentrating
on maintaining the blips across the screen
and he remembers the loon spreading its wings
and whipping the water until it neither flies above
nor swims.

Engulfed in black feathers
the heart beats—
fibrillates
across the screen.
Forgive Us Our Debts

Our Father, my father, who art in heaven,
I still hear the tang of nails attaching drywall
to studs, and see the grey dust settling
into drop cloths. The taste of parched air lingers
on my tongue and paint remains sealed in metal cans.
On the other side of the roughed-out
door, the calculator's click pushes numbers
higher and higher.

Thy will wasn't done on earth,
where you moonlighted rolling out doughnuts
and stuffing cream puffs. In the late hours of your job,
your voice vanished from the sun room
where you placed our daily bread to rise.

Surrounded by grey plastered walls, the dough
was bloated and rising. You were supposed to live
forever and ever. We were going to varnish
the walls together. I gave in to temptation
and hurled the dough against the window. Globs sunk
to drop cloths where it rose again. I scooped up the dough,
dirty and grey, and threw it away. As I prayed
at your service, the smell of yeast rose from my hands.
Church with My Father

His tenor voice, bouncing "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" off the walls of the wooden New England Church, pulls the people into a congregation as the choir walk to their chairs.

At Christmas, he stands next to me during the Lord's Prayer, praying in German—the remains of his mother—the guttural sounds heave from his chest and block the English prayer in my mouth, my voice lost in German waves.

Processional out—"May God be with you"—the choir responds as I fold my program and lie to myself that I hear his voice among the others—I collect the altar flowers.
Mother, May I?

Mother, may I take two baby steps?
I played piano scales
trying to learn how to cross over my fingers
to reach your heart.

When I was six, I could feel it beat
as I rocked in your lap
trying not to scratch the chicken pox
graphing my body.

Star clusters guided me through puberty.
Cassiopeia tied my body to a chair
where I closed my mouth, eating back the words
I wanted to spray on your body.

Your body with its wide hips you blamed on me
as you exercised trying to realign the bones
with your rib cage,
but they continued swerving out.

Swerving out of traffic,
you missed being killed in the pile-up
on 295— every time I drove by the spot,
you told me you'd almost died.

You almost died from menopause bleeding on the stairs,
but your body thumping against the banister
woke Dad and he covered you with a blanket,
called an ambulance, and waited
with his heart hitting his chest in pain.

In pain, you shut out the world
until the silence in the house
scared me into creating imaginary fights
of glass shattering and voices yelling
to the wallpapered walls.

Wallpapered walls spun in my head
as I tried to determine if you were operating in reality
when you told me to leave the house
if I wouldn't stop talking with my father.

My father told me to forgive you,
but I hated you out of existence
long before his heart exploded—
leaving me ashes.
Leaving me ashes, I found my voice
and now I don't ask— I say:
Mother, I'm taking two giant steps.
Fruits of Maine

• Strawberries

I always thought you planted the garden to produce food, but now I know you kneaded the earth and pushed the seed into the ground to escape the silence of the house.

Out in the garden, while you hoed and weeded, I waited for the berry blossoms to burst in the hearts of the green plants.

As you harvested the spinach, beets and early tomatoes, I picked the deep crimson berries. Sitting in my patch, you handed me a tomato. They grow all summer. Walking back to the house, we ate the berries.

• Raspberries

The methodical beat of your hammer on the pine walls cracked the calm until you stopped working on the sunporch, pine shavings clinging to your hair, and found me, green quart boxes in your hands.

As we traveled home from the old man's patch, sucking the bursting fruit that dyed our cereal milk pink, you hummed Mozart's Requiem, and I followed the stained tributaries of my lifeline to the faint edges of my hands.

• Apples

The hill too steep for your heart and the fruit too high for your hands to reach, you waited at home in the stifling house packing ties, socks, and sheet music. You filled the fruit, red and hard, with marmalade before baking and served it topped with pineapple ice cream in your new house—where next spring, I'll plant a patch of strawberries.
Memorial Day

Cars drive with flowers over the sloping hills
crossed in dirt paths littered with loose stones.
Wheel thrown pebbles plink off pink granite
etched with angels whose backs arch, raising trumpets
announcing arrivals. Over white carnation waves
covering oak, cries shake like rattles.

To the earth hidden under burnt maple leaves,
Grape vines strangle wrought iron fences.
Children rub stones, finding dates lichen has erased.

Writhing in the sun without water, flowers
collapse into rain-stained and faded ribbons
held in place by wires. Breezes carry echoes
of amen caught like a kite
in the rounded branches of elm trees.

People sit and talk about scrapbooks and stay
until the pink tail of the sun has dissolved
leaving crosses and obelisks rising to the moon.

Near a similar tidal pool where I poured your ashes
and waited while they sank to the snails and barnacles,
I watch waves evaporate before they fall,
and I hear your voice in every seagull's laugh.
Shards of Breathing

1.
My hands pick up broken glass
on beach sand — bottles thrown
into bonfires, tossed against rocks.
My hands pull me down to a drowning
victim tangled in weeds. They carry us
to the surface where my fingers pinch
his nose and clear his throat. One and two
and three and four and five and six and seven
and eight and nine and ten and eleven and
twelve and thirteen and fourteen and fifteen —
Breathe. Breathe.

2.
My hands wash windows — inside
and outside. Grey dust melts into cleaning fluid
streaming down glass. My hands built
this sunporch with my father. The hammer
was heavy in my hand, and nails went into pine paneling
crooked. My father's pounding echoed
his heartbeat. My hands have now found
their own heart — my hands clip
the duck tie tack on my father, lying in his coffin.

3.
My hands throw red clay on the wheel and spin
it into a vase, then bowl. The phone rings and I leave
clayprints on the wall. A doctor explains
sister — hurt — bleeding — come. Her hand,
so quick at holding a smooth vibrato, is cold.
A ventilator pushes air into her lungs
and slowly her fingers warm. My hands wash
red clayprints off the wall— they remain.
Returning to Maine

A split-open deer lines the road,
disappearing and reappearing faster than yellow
median lines. White ligaments float before sinking
in pools of red. The heart still throbs with the sudden
impact to the abdomen. And the phone

rings in Iowa.
Voices strain over the taut wire,
trying not to fall into the abyss of disconnection.
Important. Now. Operating— replay burning grooves
into the wire, scratch marks on a record. No one stops
to help the deer.

Cars run over the hind legs,
sticking in the road, and the thump bounces
children in the backseat. Surgeons clamp
arteries torn and shredded by the steering wheel.

Wheel traces can be seen in the tread
marks on the spine. White gauze swaddles
the abdomen. Breath struggles to fill the lungs.

Red foxes pull meat off the bone
and drag it beneath the undergrowth. Decomposing,
the pelt melts around and away from the bones.
Blood drips steady through the clear tubes
into an artery before exploding into the abdomen,
unable to be sewn.
Croquet

1. When the grass was dry enough so we wouldn't sink, we'd haul out the balls and mallets. Debbie chose the daffodil and I the tulip. The spheres lay on winter-faded grass breaking through snow. Winter erased the geometric wicket pattern and we were left pushing them in a zigzag around the lawn.

Field set, Debbie would start through a wicket, through a wicket to the stake. I'd follow trying to hit her ball. I'd come close with blades of grass, wisps of brown molding, separating us. On her turn, she'd place her foot on the daffodil and send the tulip sailing over melting ice to the edge of the universe.

Circling each other we'd passed through the wicket, through the wicket to the stake— poison.

2. Daffodils, crocus, and tulips blooming dot the manicured lawn. Reenacting pastimes of the nineteenth century, we pose for the camera — long dress, white gloves, and hats. Mallets resting at our feet, we turn to face the course.

Through the wicket, through the wicket, balls graze mine. But mine isn't sent to the edge of the universe. I hit the red ball. Foot on mine, I pull back the mallet ready to send the ball into orbit but before the whack in the still cherry blossomed air I hear: "That's not a nice thing to do."

Another turn. Through the wicket. Poison. I knock my ball — alone towards the edge of the universe.
Lacking Color

The basic eight squared
rise straight in cardboard tiers,
the sixty four wax points unbroken.
Colors of orange, red, green, blue, and yellow
span the shades of light reflecting off waves
brushing seashells, pink and tan.
And land of grey lichen rocks
melts in lighthouse beams.
Further inland, seagreen disappears
and corn grows fence post to fence post —
black soil, copper soybeans, and corn.

Crayons draw corn growing green out of the soil.
Corn unable to ripen in August heat,
corn frosting green as soybeans ripen,
corn freezing green through snow.
Trees orange, barns red, highways grey,
silos mottled silver, cows brown, corn magenta —
maize was discontinued.
Angel Wings
for Eric

I'd forgotten about nuts and how my family
only ate them at holidays
until you broke open an almond.

Sitting on kitchen stools,
my father and I would spend evenings
listening to chimes tinkling
as advent angels spun above the flames.
I'd open almonds and he'd slice them into angel
wings to use in stollen. Outside, snow turned blue
and bread rose on the kitchen counter,
blowing yeast kisses to the ceiling.

I used to break walnuts open
with lobster crackers for my grandmother
whose hands had clawed from arthritis.
Walnuts broken and worked out
of their shells with picks, littered
her napkin.

My mother thought we'd eat Brazil nuts
if they were baked in coffee-cake.
Even disguised by cinnamon, nutmeg, and sugar,
we wouldn't eat the nuts. Picked out,
they'd line our plates.

Hazelnuts, round and small, were hard
for my sister to crack. She'd bring me a handful
and wait as each whole and unmarred
emerged from its shell. My sister left the bowl,
stripped of hazelnut, untouched.
Shells buckling between crackers,
you pass me an almond and I slice
it into an angel — an apology
for making me meet your family —
my apology for not wanting to come.
You take the angel and place it
on the cupcake you're decorating.
Drying Starfish at Low Tide

Crevices of my toes froze and melted
with the pulse of the waves, measured in shifting
seaweed as the tide moved

into itself. Gulls overhead blocked out the sun
with a cry bouncing off
the blue mirror. Clam shells, broken, disappeared
in foam clouds clinging to granite.

Tufts of green islands melt into the grey
distance. Here there are no islands or gulls.
Instead heavy burnt silk dots the green fields
and soy beans gradually melt to gold for harvest.

No water flows along the surface,
only deep in the fertile earth. I eat my way
down into the black,
searching for the taste of salt. But there are only corn
stalks turned under for winter. Mud

between my toes seeps into my skin. Silt drinks
my body's water. Nothing remains
but the parched earth of my muscles.
Waterwaterwater
dirt, dirt, dirt
My body at low tide
smells of clam flats
with starfish drying into the air.
Landlocked

Gulls circle Portland's Back Bay,
windsurfers catch breezes,
joggers sustain themselves on salt air.
In the evening, the black rolling mirror
reflects the boulevard, and the air heavy
with beach plums wraps around lovers.
I want to take you to hear the silence
created by lolling waves.
I want to taste your lips in salt mist.

Cedar Rapids, with its green stalks growing
in acres of tangled soybeans, doesn't glow
black and deep with light.
Here I kiss you in a parking lot,
the scream of train whistles breaking
the wind as lights reflect off of grey tarmac.


**Good Night, Moon**

If the moon is held too long,
the tides stop being born
and the still water ferments with corpses of whales
unable to breathe with the weight of the water constant.

Without the moon,
astronauts circle and never land,
a ship without mooring, drifting until sucked
back to Earth and shattered on the rocks.

If the moon is eaten,
owls and coyotes have no one to bounce their songs off of.
Their calls and whines disappear
into the black sponge.

Without the moon,
the farmers are lost
in counting days till planting
with only the sun as a guide.

With dead stars lighting the night,
I swung the moon back into the black.
A light, a lighthouse beam, keeping me
off the rocks of my dreams.
At Night

Honeysuckle and hummingbird,
we roll off the couch
onto blue shag carpet that tickles my leaves
as you flap your wings trying to stay.
Breathless, your wings melt to arms
encompassing my back, no longer green.

Seaweed and seahorse,
the shower on our red and brown skin
carries our salt down the drain
in warm soapy bubbles.
Cleansed, we fall into coral towels
our land legs weak.

Lichen and lizard,
we roll in the dark cave
of our sheets—scales on moss
finding hidden meals.
In damp sheets, you fall asleep.
I turn on the light and read.
PART 2: PALM READING
Palm Reading

The Hand

An old Romanian woman living in a public assistance brownstone read the mystery of my palm when I worked for Portland Public Health.

I went to her apartment, dust-lit and stale, to see if her husband was still sucking in air under thick, heavy odors pouring forth from the grease-stained kitchen.

Under quilts made from clothing worn so thin, he lay shivering. Next to him burned the kerosene lamp, with the wick trimmed low, sustaining a flame glowing like a night-light.

When I came, he opened his eyes and flopped his hand, paralyzed, to touch mine. After bathing him, his wife called me to the kitchen. There in the sea of brown stains and waves of foreign smells she poured tea into feather-light china teacups.

"Before the change, we lived good. Here we die. Not by guns. They beat him when he refused to become a member. One day ... everything gone. And for what? Long bread lines. State controlled ideas."

She took my hands and laid them palm upward on the cold table.

"They are strong hands. Your life will be long. See, this line? You will live many years without love. Ooom, you are married but it is only to have children.

That is enough— for your seeds are strong. What happens does not matter. They will grow. They live. But not how you would have them do so. Be careful. Learn how to hold on.

Leave your palm flat. See, it is here in the streams of your skin. Nothing can hide in lines. Don't try to read your hands. It is useless. You can't read your own hands — you only follow them."
Rising from the table, she moved to stir the gravy, bubbling and hissing, filling the room with percussion belting the ceiling, crashing and raining on me—pounding against my forehead.
I sat with Rose,
my daughter, to color the sky
blue while she colored the ocean orange.
Orange wax melting a glassy shine on the paper
with the sun still white, my husband arrived home.
He stomped his feet on the cellar stairs, removing slush clinging
to treads. Rose jumped into his arms for an airplane ride around the room.
On touchdown, he sent her out. "I've been thinking, Rebecca. I'm moving out. Just for a while." Ocean, orange-half-colored crashed and hung between us.
The floating water froze and ignited — ashes fell back to the page — Rose stood in the doorway. "I'll color the ocean blue. It's blue. Don't make Daddy go away. I'll color all oceans blue," Blue over orange turned the ocean brown. Fish strangled in murky waters. Lungs straining with each blue stroke
across the burnt waters, I took the page away from
Rose—blue sky—white sun—brown
ocean—and put it in his briefcase.
"Step on a crack you'll break your mother's back."

Rose and her friends skip rope in the driveway. Their chant rises pulsating, like a surgeon's scalpel, into my back. I lie flat, unable to pull my knees to my chest — unable to close the window.

"Step on a crack you'll break your mother's back."
Cold white out of sight, my hands fumble to escape the sheets. Pain splits through my back making the room melt into get well cards.

"Step on a crack you'll break your mother's back."
Rises like white caps in a storm — grey and loud — penetrating my skin. Back flat, back on the floor, back against the wall, my back breaks as Rose steps through the crack.
Flows of Perspiration

My daughter hops on chalk squares. Balanced on her left foot, she starts, poised to miss the lines sending her back to one. Quivering on her left foot, she bends to the rock. No hands down. Flapping, she keeps her balance. She has no music in those hands. She has only wood and rocks. Rough hands whose lines are flows of perspiration. Hop. Together. Stable. On two feet she doesn't dance, heart, pulled elsewhere she moves back to balance.

On the left. Carefully within the chalk lines. Foot solidly on grey asphalt. Two more to go before the turn back. The turn she has no grace to perform. Quick her arms by her sides the ground because sound Gathering poise and power.

On two feet she relaxes hands pulled down to is too high to understand. she moves to the final square where mid-air turn done to a beat I don't hear, leaves me alone with a cold cup of tea.
Reformed Hands

She molded her hands
in plaster. Plaster catching every line
showing her future, which she can't interpret.
She holds the cold hands
in her vital ones— each telling the same unreadable story—
and she is not bothered by the sweat
of her hands staining the plaster.

Hands strong
hands warm
hand moving
hands dirty
hands growing
hands rough
hands aching
hands molding
hands writing
hands balancing
hands young
hands two
hands chapped
hands holding
hands left
hands telling

a story. Her story. She presses red clay
into the dry plaster lines. She paints
the fired clay with white glaze. Flat
and chalky, the hands become glassy
in the final firing.

She takes the glassy hands —
white over red — and smashes
them. On a flat base of wet plaster,
she wedges the shards of broken hands.
White lines ending abruptly at edges of red.
Her story half told in the missing pieces.
Laying on of hands

Rose's hands come at me,
like clubs, beating me back, back
out of her life.

I hold on. Her body wrenches
and my hands fall off into the dirt
where they land palm upward.
She pulls back and blocks my outreached arms.

Arms reach out to hold her hand, to teach her how
to dance and move, how to play scales, stir soup,
knit mittens, but she reaches for wood to build rooms,
to heat the rooms in winter, to disfigure her hands
with callouses.

She moves to a beat I've never heard.
Not since she was me and her hands were
my stomach—pounding
to get out. Grasping the first breath of air before her lungs filled.
Waves

When I open my eyes, Rose stands with tea.
"Drink. You'll feel better. Do you want to be well? You came back so soon. I thought it was a long treatment program."

She won't listen to me or the lines. That's why she never learned how to transform the dots into a language beating in undulating sounds. She pushes the tea towards me and the translucent steam rises and falls like breathing. In and out. One and two. Forwards and backwards. The undying breath, like the steady drip of a faucet, rattles in front of me. Dancing, dancing, spinning, hissing against my forehead.

I push it back with my hands, but it closes in and my palms can't hide me. I want her to know she has to follow my hands. I try and tell her, but she leaves—waving her palm, pushing away my lines. Following her own.