

B E G I N



S I O B H A N P H I L L I P S

here is Fred Astaire in his white double-breasted
suit and black tie here is Eleanor Powell in blade-straight pleats
and soft sleeves here are the two of them tapping on stage
on screen in *Broadway Melody* this is 1940

their feet playing with the notes of the shadowy
band in the pit sure across its silence taps never quite coming
to rest only to pause perhaps they rehearsed so long
the pianist quit they'd come up in vaudeville which took

tap from shows where the two-colored rule meant no black
dancer could ever dance onstage alone and they move
as one as pure coincidence but never touch not even the slight
brush of a white hem until they bow at the end hand in

hand and the camera pulls back to the crowd clapping
he had switched his last name from Austerlitz which sounded
like a battle or a Jew and wore a dark hat to add height
and tapped duets with a sister until he was thirty-two

and she would be ordained in the Unity faith
while filling clubs with her tapping feet and needed to lighten
her freckles and curl her hair and cap her teeth
to be deemed good-enough by the studio hush it is night the stars

are out and the tune is *Begin the Beguine* a Creole term for white
women from a kind of Medieval nun which became the name
for a languorous tropical number in which couples twine tightly
together so nothing like this tapping which brooks

no caress every now and then without switching
their steps one of them looks across at the other's taps hopeless
to catch there on the black glass of the stage the trace like the wake
of a glance not to test or to beat some move no they cannot

help themselves they are the whole of a show the seeing
the seen in that mirrored theater shot in black
and white to save money since Hitler in Poland
meant uncertainty overseas for tapping in pictures we're just

two hoofers Ellie told Fred to break the ice when they met
and then it was all right she tapped like a machine gun
like a man he said I don't think I will plunge the nation into war
a critic wrote by stating that he is the greatest tap dancer in the world