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DANCING WORDS: ILLNESS & THE WRITING PROCESS



The easiest way to extinguish the light of a young writer is to tell them that writing is a solitary act, unless, of course, the budding talent happens to be introverted and like it that way. Any dream can be killed by such warnings. As a child, watching primadonna Evelyn Hart of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, I took ballet lessons and dreamed of becoming a ballerina. I knew nothing then of Alvin Ailey or Bill T. Jones. Indeed, I had never seen a dancer of color upon the stage. I was too far up North of the equator to know what was possible. An older dancer, perhaps a teenager, frightened me by telling me that I would eventually have to practice five to six hours a day. At five years of age, five to six hours a day seemed very long. In addition to dance, I played the piano which took at least one to two hours of practice a day in addition to full time going to school and up to two hours of the French curriculum after dinner with my Caribbean, French-educated parents who were adamant that I should not be “kept behind” in the French-Canadian schools whose curriculum, they thought, lacked rigor. The truth is that anything worth doing in adulthood, for employment or out of passion, will take most of one’s waking hours. For the artist, it matters not the medium, the passion to create will find its outlet and emerge.

Writers, like dancers, do what they do because of a need to communicate, not just with an immediate circle of friends or acquaintances, but with a much vaster circle made up of individuals they might never meet. All writing, like choreography, must take place in solitude. The words, the steps, can materialize on the page in no other way. If you read well known writers on what they love and hate about their profession, it’s the solitary quality of the work that

they'll underscore, usually the ritual it takes to get into the "zone," or the knowledge that getting up from a satisfying day at the desk, the writer might be faced with nothing and no one with whom to share the lively world invented purely in their mind.

It's the threshold in either direction that hampers us, not the writing itself. Some will do anything to escape the reality of living between worlds but still they are brought back to the living page because there can be nothing like the feeling of transmuting one's thoughts and visions into solid form for others to consume. Yet, what I've discovered in the last several years, six of them afflicted with the symptoms of unrelenting chronic fatigue syndrome, is that writing isn't as solitary as it seems nor as sedentary. In the attempt to regroup after the loss of my own vital energy, I've discovered that I was never more social as when I wrote and in teaching others how to find their inner muse; I've found that writing is intensely physical and have found no better metaphor for the physicality of writing than dance.

When I first fell ill with debilitating CFS and decided after much duress and anxiety to take a leave from my position as a tenured professor of English at a State University, I retreated to a seaside house in California shared with two older friends in the midst of completing their doctoral degrees. We had an understanding that we would live together in wellness and that we would do everything to maximize healing and minimize toxicity in the household. For me, this meant that I did not have to explain sleeping for ten hours at a time or in the middle of the day or why it took me an hour to walk up and down the cliff side walk near our house, a distance that would take others ten or fifteen minutes. I could keep my own hours. Talk if I wanted. Keep my silence. All the while, I meditated and tried to find answers to my physical collapse, answers that I had not been able to find through medical practitioners.

Never one to climb mountains, low on stamina, I was hard-pressed to explain my current state of extremely low energy. I had come from a family that did not believe in women exerting energy so my body was not trained to build energy but I had gone against the family current in my teenaged years and young adulthood, by necessity, for self-protection, and taken up muscle-toning as well as other forms of exercise. By my mid-twenties, shortly before the chronic fatigue hit, I could claim to cross-train, exercising three to five times a week with bodybuilding at a local gym, rollerblading, and running for twenty to forty minute spurts. My metabolism ran high when I followed this regiment and my writing continued to flow. And then, it seemed all of a sudden, all systems stopped firing. My writing appeared to have piqued at twenty-eight; soon thereafter a stranger stalking incident compounded early burnout and a morning run left me unable to function for the rest of the day as did any other kind of exercise.

Once able to read four to five books simultaneously over a week or two, I was left struggling to make sense of words on a page as if I had never read before. Life, as I had known it, seemed to slowly ebb away. It seemed that writing was lost, perhaps for always.

My undiagnosed state from professional and semi-professionals had run the gamut from depression to MS to Parkinson's. Chronic fatigue syndrome and other like ailments were never mentioned, most likely, I was to discover later, because they are assumed anathema to women of color who are more often diagnosed as depressed if they are diagnosed at all and seen as cumbersome complainers who should be able, by constitution, to bear the weight of the world..

I had been interested in reading Agnes de Mille's *Dance to the Piper* because of a Martha Graham quote often cited from it:

There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, the expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium. . . and be lost. The world will not have it.

It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable it is; nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.

You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate YOU. Keep the channel open. . . No artist is pleased. . . There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction; a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive.

(335)

This is a quote that has so inspired me over the years that I have passed it on to students in writing courses, as well as to friends and budding artists/writers struggling with their art, or, more accurately, with themselves.

In my mid-twenties, I had been writing at what seemed to be a fevered pitch even though what I produced then trickled into print over a ten-year period. Between 1993 and 1999, I had produced five book-length manuscripts; I refused a contract on one (a book of literary criticism arguing for the similitude of writings produced by American men and women of color) not wanting to complete the requested revisions which called for over-theorizing the text; the others, two books of criticism and two novels were eventually published, some with minor revisions, some with no more revision than a change in title. The passion with which I wrote was political as well as visceral; it was something that I felt *in the body*. I wrote to music since I had been

raised by a musician, my father, who, at one time, had had as many as three electric organs in the house, on top of the usual acoustic guitars. I often celebrated what I felt to be a wonderful turn of phrase or a solid paragraph by singing in my seat, or by getting up and dancing in the living room. When I was so focused on following the trail of the writing itself that I had no time to take phone calls, to eat, or to sleep, the end of a period of writing was punctuated by ravenousness, a fatigued body but also an intoxicating glee. This was the pulse of “divine dissatisfaction,” the desire to get it right and then, when a manuscript was completed, to do it all over again. Daytime jags of writing were frequently interrupted by a run in the park, a half hour of rollerblading or preceded by time in the gym in the early hours of the morning. Writing, writing which in my depths *felt* successful (for I measured success not by acceptance, i.e., publication, but by a resonance in the soul), drove me and recalibrated my physical and mental form. Psychologically, writing was a panacea against any form of melancholy. Physically, it kept me in top form: I exercised; I ate well; I socialized.

In order to write, one has to live, and to live, one has to fully occupy the body, whatever its state. Writing is not so much an escape from life, I believe, as it is a *possession*, a trance not so far removed from *vodou* rituals through which the body becomes a vessel for something more than itself and becomes a portal for communion, not only with the gods, but with the perhaps more enigmatic complexities of mere mortals. By the time I fell ill, I had yet to have read the source of the above quote itself, de Mille’s memoir. But when I did, I began to understand the relationship between dance and words in a way that I had only intuited. De Mille, of course, by virtue of her dual-expression through words and the body already knew the way.

At the height of my illness, I wondered if Graham’s quote still applied. I was blocked at all levels. Not only could I no longer run, rollerblade or lift weights, I could no longer even *think*. No, I did not stop being able to process everyday thoughts or lose my basic ability to communicate. But there was an entirely frightening moment when, on fellowship that Fall of 2001 in the South of France at The Camargo Foundation, I tried to write a few lines and, entranced by a thought, I rushed to write it down. As I attempted to write the sentence, I was confronted with the meaninglessness of a two-letter word. The word: *is*. An ‘i’ followed by an ‘s’ suddenly meant nothing and I struggled to remember what this word could mean, if, indeed, it had any meaning at all. For five minutes that seemed like an eternity, I struggled with these letters, my pen poised over paper, my eyes fixed on the blue waters of the Mediterranean before me. It suddenly dawned on me that this word should be easy and that there was something very wrong. The more I struggled, the more the meaning of the letters evaded me.

Panic mounted with frustration and just as I was about to question my hold on language itself, meaning returned. *Is, to be*, an action verb. The most overused verb in the English language. Relieved, I wrote the word down but, by then, the struggle over, I had lost the thought that I had been trying to write.

It was as difficult to read, at least in English. I began to gather that there was a connection between the fatigue and the fact that I functioned almost entirely in my second language rather than my first, a second language acquired at age ten and professionalized through years of higher study, while my first language, French, atrophied. I was lucky to be in France then, even working with only what seemed like one cylinder of a four-cylinder mind. I could read biographies and *les actualités*. It was through the French newspapers that I learned about 9-11, five days late, six days after I had eaten in a restaurant at the foot of the towers trying to evade defecating pigeons.

I was diminished, surely, but I was alive, and I wondered what Graham's quote *should* mean, what it was that I was left to bring to the world, unique to myself, if I was no longer able to write, or to think, or to read as once I had read, voraciously, like a bottomless well. I wondered if I could still consider myself a writer as I worked doggedly on a translation that would not see the light of day. I said nothing of my illness to the other fellows in residence. I hid myself well enough. I spent much of my time in bed, which was not much taxing as my suite overlooked the Mediterranean, the village harbor, and cliffs of the *camargue* in the distance. I surfaced when I had enough energy to get through the hours in the company of others. The second tragedy of CFS is that it does not "show" and since one emerges when "well," it is almost impossible to explain to others. It's an illness of retreat, one that used to be considered "psychosomatic" even though the physical repercussions could not be denied if ill-measured. If one views the illness optimistically, like depression, it is likely that it provides exactly what one needs, that is, a step back from the world, a space within and beyond the reach of others, in which to replenish the spent self.

Words would not cooperate. The body would not move. I finally allowed myself to collapse, to sleep twelve to fifteen hours of the day. When I could function I would work on the translation, the *raison d'être* of my fellowship, and otherwise jot down revelations as they came to me about illness and survival. I turned to photography for self-expression and reveled in what my eyes could see. I determined that I was still an artist even if my main expression had been cut off. It was a painful time despite the explorations into other arts. From photography I moved to sculpture once returned to California. It was a dark time in which the

exhaustion of mind and body seemed difficult to distinguish from depression. Today, many years into recovery, I would venture to say that I was suffering from a spiritual depression but that is a matter for another essay.

How was it, then, that dance returned to my mind in this state of stasis?

When back in Santa Cruz, I read every memoir I could that dealt with physical illness, especially those to do with MS or Parkinson's disease as some of my symptoms ranged from the loss of motor skills (symptoms which had flared in my teenaged years at times of high stress without any explanation), to being unable to judge accurately the distance of objects within reach, to being unable to speak coherently (a temporary subletter in the shared house who had not been used to my illness thought, at one point, without saying so directly, that I had been drinking), and then came upon de Mille's many volumes. De Mille had written not just one memoir but many, throughout her life, much like Maya Angelou had, the latter beginning her series with *Why does the Caged Bird Sing?* De Mille's memoirs end rather than begin with caging, as I discovered, when I began to read her *Reprieve* mostly from my bed in Santa Cruz.

Written at an advanced age, this particular memoir recounts a tragic episode in de Mille's extraordinary career, that of suffering a massive cerebral hemorrhage minutes before the rise of the curtain, to find herself not performing but hospitalized, bed-ridden, with a verdict of indefinite paralysis. She was not expected to live. The memoir recounts first de Mille's struggle with losing the use of her body, her life-long tool of expression. She recalls Graham's admonition *not* to be like her, that is, an inveterate perfectionist who was tortured by her passion. Graham, de Mille was to discover through time, was a genius but also a tortured soul married to her art but finding the art, as she produced it, wanting. Unlike Graham, de Mille pursued some amount of balance in her life, marrying and having a son but she still thirsted for Graham's acclaim. It was this thirst that had found her fretting behind the curtain that day, replaying the movements of her choreography in her mind while worrying about the set and other details of the performance. It was that drive that set a blood vessel to burst in her brain and left her all but dead. Despair soon turns into gritty determination, however, and de Mille fights the doctor's verdict to slowly and painfully regain the use of her body. At first, she cannot speak, and her editor gives her slips of paper to make notes, soon encouraging her to begin to write her thoughts. These slips of paper become the genesis of the memoir which I came to be reading many years later, not knowing what to do about my own body's much less dramatic collapse, a body much less used to physical rigor. De Mille had these words of encouragement to offer her readers and to others in similar circumstances:

Finally – and this is very difficult – you must realize that your situation is changing. No matter how slowly, it is changing. You will become more independent week by week. You will become more able and you must push yourself to do for yourself as far as you can, no matter how exhausting, no matter how troublesome. The tendency will be to take for granted that you can't because up to now you haven't been able to. You must not rest in this concept. You *must* get out of bed if you can. You must walk across the room if you can. You must fetch and try to lift with care, naturally (you know your own dreadful limitations). But you must keep trying. This will be exhausting. But you must if you are to have relationships with the people around you. . . . And, ultimately don't always talk about yourself as in this book. People are curious and will say they are deeply interested, but they truly are not. In the first place, they cannot comprehend what you are telling them. Second they feel inadequate to respond in any intelligent way. And, third, they are deeply dismayed and rendered uneasy by your example. You are a horrible warning. In the old days you would have been killed as either useless or a bad luck omen. We are more temperate and we do not kill these days. But we easily tire and we can avoid. So don't press your luck. The others are not fatigued. They are fine and they may just run out of patience. (191-193)

Of course, I was not undergoing the same level of disability. I was not recovering from death's door. Still, the fatigue that hammered at me had left me incapable of functioning normally and incapable both of writing as I was used to and communicating verbally as I wanted. My circle of friends became narrower and, indeed, even those that asked could seldom understand what I was going through, arguing against my decrepitude by offering platitudes such as the idea that human beings often tire at the end of the day. It was no use arguing, or explaining, I was too tired for all of that, and had to preserve what little energy I had to figuring out how to live under these new conditions and, possibly, how to beat an invisible disease that no one could readily diagnose and, as such, could not cure. Indeed, once I came upon de Mille's *Reprieve*, I discovered that I was searching less for a diagnosis than for some sign of the possibility of recovery. What I was looking for was what any writer knows earns him or her his/her bread and butter: the tools for revision. I was looking not so much for a key to diagnosis, which I realized by then might never come, but for the tools of my *recomposition*

Perhaps it was then that I began to understand that, for me, writing had had a dormant physical component, one that is often ignored in favor of romanticizing an image of the writer chained to his or her desk, pale-faced, perhaps even suffering from scurvy or some other form of

malaise, like alcoholism or manic-depression. Though such cases exist, and they are legendary, the writer who keeps writing must function in society and with some mobility, must have some purpose of social intercourse leading her or him back to the desk. There is no other way about it. Even those who maintained destructive habits during their writing life but who were intent on continuing to write knew how to make a space for the writing itself; the rest was fodder, if it could be remembered. The raw material for the writer is nothing more or less than the stuff of life.

We take “living” so for granted that when the flow of life becomes interrupted, it becomes clear what feeds art and vice versa. It also becomes clear when one attempts to walk the beginner through the techniques of one’s art. Trying to explain to a beginning writer why their character is “flat” as opposed to “round,” or their language empty of feeling, and they will tell you that they are describing what they see and what they feel but, often, what they’ve forgotten in the process of translating lived experience onto the page is how to *inhabit* their subject by using not the mind but the body as their main processing tool.

In her Peabody-award winning documentary, *A Dancer’s Life*, Martha Graham went to pains to illustrate that the life of dancers upon the stage was not just mere mimicry but a deliberate bringing together of the theatrical and corporeal. Dancers had not only to remember bodily movements but they had to remember their character upon the stage. They had both to be utterly present within the body and removed from it in order to turn in a valid performance. Through the documentary, Graham demonstrates this transformation by narrating the film as she begins to don the costume of Medea; she puts on makeup and costume in her first articulation of the character. She explains that a dancer must learn everything they can about their character, how s/he moves, their posture, their attitude; how that *being* communicates itself *through* the body, without words, only the body. Then comes the choreography that pulls together appearance and knowledge to tell a story. The training of her dancers is unveiled as rigorous and disciplined but also as communal. There is no story upon the stage without a group dynamic which allows each character to be revealed to the audience, however minor their role. Every dancer yearns to be a star, says Graham, but they cannot aspire to be soloists without first being in the corps, then graduating to smaller group dances, then to the *pas de deux*. The solo is an outgrowth of a group experience, or community of dancing partners. By the time the soloist is ready for the spotlight, he or she has learned both to yield to discipline and to forego their ego. The body having lent itself to something greater than itself, both character and story can emerge. The foundational context of the dance contributes to the staged setting and

atmosphere, completing the greater picture and contributing to the audience's willingness to trust the dancers upon the stage.

I have always been drawn to dance for the reasons Graham articulates in her documentary. It seems to me, as I've written earlier, that the dancer's ability to transcend the body while inhabiting it is a spiritual act, as close to possession for the *vodouisant* whereby communion with the gods is achieved through ritual dance in a community of believers. In these ritual dances, often one or more believers is possessed by the god worshipped by the community and takes on all of that god's affects and personality traits. The possessed's body is temporarily borrowed by the god who then speaks through the body to his/her worshippers. Even the voice of the possessed may change in pitch, giving voice to the god in a tone and cadence approximating his assigned gender and temperament – both of which may be utterly different than that of the body inhabited. The alchemy of this transformation is divinely inspired but conjured through dance. It is the dance that makes the alchemy possible and the spirit of dance that brings on the possession. But what happens to such communion when the body falls in disrepair, the words of the stories yet to tell out of reach? I've come to believe that whatever the state of mind and body, it is the divine spark of creativity in each of us that burgeons forth and reveals to us the hidden strengths and resources of the body at times when it seems most fragile and fallible.

A strange thing started to happen to me after the onset of my illness.

When the illness started isn't quite clear since it took three years to be diagnosed with CFS (with still a small possibility of a grade of MS so low no one felt it worth it to bother to test for it). The strange thing that happened was that my level of sensitivity rose. Like a seer, or a *houngan*, I could suddenly feel other people's pains and sometimes intuit their thoughts before they voiced them. It wasn't as if I didn't have some of these abilities beforehand -- some say we all have the capacity for some measure of psychic ability since, as the Buddhists and New Agers contend, we each form a part of the universal mind. What was different was the intensity of what I could detect. If someone had suffered a loss or was in emotional turmoil, I would feel a searing pain in the middle of my chest as soon as I was within a few feet's range. I would learn later on about chakras and intuitive empaths but, at the time, it seemed unwelcome information that only overshadowed the area that had once been inhabited by the worlds of my imagination, and words. As my body failed to respond to its normal cues, like a tuning fork, it picked up on the emotional debris all around me as if set on a new course that I could do nothing else than follow.

Inevitably, my interaction with my environment and with others slowed to what seemed to be a crawl. Since my speech was no longer smooth, I limited conversations to close others who could tolerate long pauses or guess at what I wanted to say. Since I could no longer write eloquent phrases, I watched films or listened to music, or read pseudo-spiritual texts hoping they might give me answers on how to regain my energy. After my relocation to Northern California, I attempted to find new forms of exercise. I tried to bicycle and discovered that I couldn't get very far. I tried to run and found that my body wept. Each attempt left me sequestered in my bed. Having lost my main forms of exercise, I took up what was left: walking. Not power walking, or distance walking, just walking.

I read Gail Sher's contemplative guide to the writer, *One Continuous Mistake*, and learned about a form of meditative walking called *kinhin*:

Kinhin is slow walking meditation (about a half-step per breath) usually practiced for short periods between longer periods of sitting meditation as a means of refreshing one's body, mind, and spirit.

Practice *kinhin* in a setting of your choice, then write about what you noticed.

(35)

Elsewhere, I found more detailed instructions on breathing and practicing *kinhin*. The source escapes me now but the directives were clear. One had to re-learn how to walk in order to walk with the breath, in order to learn the actual depth and pace of one's breath. One has to feel the entire soul of the foot's movement from toe to heel as one breathes, in, and then, out. Both feet are always, somehow, in contact with the ground and each foot lifts and descends in unison with the intake or outtake of breath. The fluidity of movement resembles Tai Chi at an even slower pace and eventually acquires the flow of a dance with the self and the earth with breathing as the conduit between the two.

Neglecting Sher's instruction to write what I noticed while walking, and despite curious glances, I began to walk in this way, usually mid-morning on weekdays on the seaside path close to our house. There were few walkers and runners at this time and I could do as I like. I remember that time as one of the most healing periods, not just in the midst of this illness, but in my life. I think that those of us born by the ocean return to it always with a sense of coming back to self, as if our very bodies are waves upon the shore returning to the wealth of the undertow. The continuous sight of ocean on a daily basis did something to assuage the constancy of my loss of home, a pain that recedes with time but is never completely gone. I followed the meandering path, step-by-step, breath-by-breath. Well, it went more like this: heel to toe, breathe in, foot

up, breathe out, toe to heel, repeat, in reverse. It takes practice to walk in *kinhin* with the fullness of the breath, to take note of the length of it, to pause between each intake and outtake of air. Once one does, once one masters walking with the breath, the flow, the fluidity that occurs is, well, breathless, and very, very slow.

Imagine performing *kinhin* on a crowded sidewalk, perhaps having picked up your pace only slightly. The world seems to be moving forward unusually quickly. At the same time, a whole over world that one would usually miss comes into sight. On these walks, I noticed flowers that had bloomed on the cliffs, then a small memorial for a girl of fourteen who had slipped to her death below, then sea otters floating on the ocean, and, once, far from shore, the gasp of a whale as it came up for air, sending feet of saltwater spray straight up into the sky above. While I saw these remarkable sights, from the most mundane to the breathtaking, others rushed past me, running, or talking without stopping, oblivious to the richness all about them, consumed by the frenzy of what has come to be known as modern life. If each of us walked in consciousness of breath, I realized, we would not be so lost in the flurry of activity that we lament having taken over our lives in most big cities.

When the fatigue hits hard, even now, in remission, when I forget that no bank of energy will last and that a day of full on activity will be followed by sometimes not only one but perhaps two or three days of mind-numbing lethargy, that my body will react as if it were elderly and move at a pace some thirty years in the future, I will try to remember these things that I have seen, the deeper layers of notice and understanding that have reinvigorated both my teaching and my return to writing. “Buddhists recognize this,” writes Agnes de Mille, again in *Reprieve*, “the state of being aware. If the wind is blowing, they’re aware of walking. If they are sweeping with a broom, they are aware of the broom, they are aware of the broom and the act of sweeping.” And, “like a swimmer, I went deeper and deeper into states of being I had never dreamt of before, states of perceiving and feeling that had nothing to do with achievement or business or duty or morals. I was awake.” Swimming was one of the forms of exercises I confronted in recovery; as a child I had swam in the ocean without fear. When we had moved to Canada, for some reason, I feared drowning in pools. I not only had to learn again how to move through water, how not to fear my feet rising from the bottom of constricted space, but to trust that the buoyancy of the water could keep the fatigue at bay as I moved, keep me awake rather than remaining in the dreamless state of sleep that the syndrome demands as if for payment for having overworked the body beyond its capacity. Everything had to be relearned, from going with the flow, to breathing.

“I have based everything that I had done on the pulsation life,” writes Martha Graham in her autobiography, *Blood Memory*, “which is, to me, the pulsation of breath. Every time you breathe life in or expel it, it is a release or a contraction. It is that basic to the body. You are born with these two movements and you keep both until you die. But you begin to use them consciously so that they are beneficial to the dance dramatically. You must animate that energy within yourself. Energy is the thing that sustains the world and the universe. It animates the world and everything in it” (46). Perhaps I became afflicted with CFS to recognize this pulse of life within me that, until then, I had taken for granted, and not taken care of the way a dancer must take care of their body in order to have any kind of longevity. Perhaps it was all happening so that I would eventually find my way back to my source of creativity, which need not be extraordinary, simply honest and true to what it is I bring to the world, uniquely flawed but only mine to offer.

In that first year of seemingly unfathomable illness, of days spent sleeping and walking and endeavoring to eat well, traveling the Monterey Peninsula coast in my car once I was back from fellowship in the South of France, to see Steinbeck country (as I thought of it then as Steinbeck had been the first author I had read when learning English; the book had been *My Red Pony*), I was unusually drawn to see dance performances, usually staged in Berkeley, San Francisco. Dance, somehow, still held me in its spell in a way that very little else staged could. Only now do I realize that dance has continued to teach me even as I failed to take it up as an art.

That year of abrupt changes in ability and energy, I saw Michael Baryshnikov perform a dance sequence with his White Oak Project dancers that left a distinct impression upon me. The piece, entitled “The Experts,” and commissioned from young choreographer Sarah Michelson by Baryshnikov, seemed to puzzle critics who could not fathom the overriding soundtrack (a roaring car), strangely clad dancers, and set (a floor covered with a huge sheet of bubble wrap). Indeed, the only thing critic Anna Kisselkoff found interesting in the piece was the bubble wrap floor covering, who wrote in her review: “snap, crackle, and pop accompanied every step, and the piece entertained”). It seemed to me that critics had entirely missed the point of the performance that, for me, was a critique, veiled as comedic performance, of the exacting art that dance is, whether for the classical stage or for the commercial reviews of Broadway. The actor/dancers pantomimed restlessness and boredom on the edges of the bubble wrap, edges representing the “off-stage” area in which dancers made their entrances and exits. They chatted amongst themselves; one appeared to be smoking. When their turn came, they seemed to effortlessly make their way across the stage, straight-faced, caring little about the

audience, “experts” plying their trade. The featured virtuoso, Baryshnikov, was presented in cuffs, arms tied behind his back, in a chiffon Chanel skirt. When his turn came, he crossed the stage with a bewildered look on his face as if, by some chance of mistaken identity, he had been taken off the streets and thrust upon the stage. The gender-bending costume had the force of flattening Baryshnikov’s persona, of displacing it, even, in such a way as to be confusing to the audience and refusing their access to an accurate representation of their idol. Indeed, he appears bewilderingly masked thereby undercutting the audience’s expectations and rendering them all the more transparent by frustrating them. The bubble wrap floor also interrupts expectation. It effectively disrupts the notion of play in the piece at the same time as it disturbs the assumed contract between audience and performers – that our disbelief should remain in suspension: every time a dancer leaps and falls, the bubble wrap explodes, noisily, fracturing the illusion that dance, when performed at high levels, is effortless. The exploding plastic wrap lets us know the force with which the body comes into contact with the ground after each leap and the mind is immediately forced to move between accepting the mock-play of the dance and the reality of bleeding feet, overextended sinews, muscles warped against the effects of past injuries. What the piece revealed to me was the extent to which every dance performance is also a play, one in which the cost of participating with the audience in manufacturing the suspension of disbelief is absorbed by the bodies upon the stage who otherwise make their performance appear effortless. Every performance has an impact upon the body; the most successful avoids costing the body injury but it exacts a cost nonetheless. At the time, every time I heard a bubble pop upon the stage, I thought I felt it reverberate like the impact of wood against muscle and bone; later, I thought of the bubbles as cells that one slowly, one by one, crushed. They could have been brain cells. I thought of them as the energy one drew upon for movement and the cost of excellence. Then I realized that the ability to *perform critique* was in itself a tour de force.

Sitting in that audience, knowing myself to be altered on the physical plane in ways invisible to others, I realized that the genius of Baryshnikov, and of others like him, like Graham and de Mille, and, indeed, Evelyn Hart, had not only been the perfection of technique and charisma: what they shared was *longevity* in an art form where most hang up their shoes in their thirties. At fifty-two years of age and about to announce his retirement, Baryshnikov was allowing his body and even his persona to be manipulated in a choreography by a woman twenty years his junior to advance an argument, *through the body*, about the fragility of the body and the danger of taking icons and even art so seriously that something greater, what de Mille has called an “idiom of movement” has been lost. De Mille utilizes this phrase in describing how she

came to train herself as a choreographer over a five-year period: “One does not think out movement. One moves. One thinks out pattern. One moves well if one is used to moving and originally if one has developed through exercise a spontaneous idiom of expression. But I had nowhere to dance, and no company to work with” (DP 159). The absence of community, the peer group with which to exercise, to communicate through the body, drove de Mille to distraction. But it was through this separation from the ordinary that she developed her own language, her own movements, her own lexicon of dance. I wondered if this, in some way, was happening to me. At the very least, in watching the White Oak Dance company in Berkeley that day, I understood that Baryshnikov had not so much defected for America in a romantic gesture for prosaic Americana (as some critics have contended) and “all that jazz.” He, better than anyone else of his generation, understood the toll that ceaseless and exacting leaps for an adoring public would take on the body and psyche. He was willing to retrain his physique, learn from others, abandon one community to enter another. The exchange guaranteed not fame (though it brought that too) but longevity, the real metal of an artist. It was this lesson, I realized, that the illness of chronic fatigue was seeking to teach me.

Any artist has to work with an eye towards the future, towards self-preservation for the good of the self and of others. Longevity is the antidote to burn-out; it manifests in the ability to impose limits upon one’s self, to rein in enthusiasm in favor of a long view that will reveal our better selves, our more mature selves, at some later date we must trust is to come.

When I teach students to write, I tell them to feel their bodies in their seats, to breathe in and out, to feel themselves in the writing act before they lose themselves to the words they are about to write out or type. When we workshop pieces, I ask them to listen closely to what they *feel* in other’s writing: does the writing awake the senses? Can they feel themselves in the character’s skin? Do the characters have a physicality that can be confirmed through the expression of their point of view? Does the writing sing? Can they feel it like a beating heart within themselves? The secret to this kind of writing is to dance with the character, not to hover like an outsider on the fringes of their reality. The secret to writing that *moves* is to be within the words, to inhabit them like a second skin. It’s not so easy when the body one is forced to possess is breaking down, or unlikable, or alien, but it is in this discomfort that we grow, learning what it is to be another so unlike ourselves that we must dig deep to find their humanity, indeed our own.

My own body grown deficient, what I learned from returning to dance, as a spectator, in that time, was that the body not only speaks to us, it speaks through us. Disease is a wake-up

call, like the popping of plastic bubble wrap between the fingers. We normally do not have to think about movement. *We move.* But the dancer moves to choreography that has been rehearsed again and again until it becomes a language that the muscles remember with little prompting. When the body begins to fail through illness, movement, like a creative process, must be learned in a new way. The object is not to move as one once did but to move in a new direction, to rehearse the beneficial change. Internally, the shift feels like a mutation on a cellular level, a new order that, like art itself, is demanded by the body aching for its longevity. If the call is ignored, disease sets in like a cancer in the marrow, and does not lose its grip. Dance thus offered me the metaphor for recovery.

My body is retraining me, composing me, like a demanding choreographer. I began to learn other languages, a smattering of German, some Japanese. Italian took hold more deeply than the other languages and I eventually lived in Italy for some months, recuperating, finding a new way to connect words. I walked. I learned Tai Chi, Yoga, Qi Gong, exercise designed to be slow, thought out, a process. I learn how much sleep is needed to get through the days even though no two days are the same. When I am overworked, I sleep for two to three hours at the end of the afternoon and early evening. At night I sleep at least nine hours. And the writing, eventually, graciously, returns.

When I sleep, I see myself dancing across a stage in slow motion, like Paul Taylor in front of his strobe lights, a dance he was famous for in the early nineties. Suspended in mid-air, his feet appeared to never touch the ground and the audience could not hear the impact of feet against the boards. He made it seem effortless. But the truth is that behind every creative process there is effort. The key, dancers have shown me, is not to burn out; there must be more to the person on the stage than their persona, more than simply yearning to be on the stage. There must be someone behind the curtain whose face is not waiting to be seen, a passionate worker whose sweat is hidden in the art he or she eventually unveils to the world, however imperfect or genius its expression. The art itself is a veil. It is a form of artifice. But through it, whether the story to be told is transmuted through the veil of the body or through a composition of words, all of it is movement followed by the flickering of eyes across the paper, or the stage, hungry for glimpses of their own humanity.

So what if the body is broken or breaking down? So what if the words express an uncertain beauty? What matters is not achieving perfection, it is, rather, the maintenance of the sacred vessel of the body and mind over time in order to tell some piece of one's truth in the materials at our disposal. The dance, the words: these are the performances, the possessions

that leave us restless for more, the *idiom of movement* that provides the bridge to communicate the pleasures and pains of life to others in an exchange for their witnessing of the artist's pulse of life in our shared march towards the inevitability of erasure. Through the body, its memories and its expression, an imprint remains. This, in the end, for the artist, is all that matters.

Calabash

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