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9-1-2018

The Fine Art of Flying

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Recommended Citation

Haynes, Connor, "The Fine Art of Flying" (2018). *Student Publications*. 134.
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The Fine Art of Flying

I have seen plenty of others perform these simple steps before; and in my mind, I know them well. Just piqué, arabesque, chassé, step, leap; hands here, legs there, and repeat on the other side. My memory locked this in weeks ago, but my body has not caught up. My leg muscles tremble with the ineptness of a newborn giraffe. My arms flop around, seeking direction from my brain and receiving garbled, foreign messages in return. I've not been trained for this. Amy, Brie, Kait, and Paige have all been dancing for over a decade, and yet for some reason far from me, it is I chosen for this spotlight and not them.

As many girls do, I've stood in front of the mirror before, judging my every flaw. My ankles are blocks. My legs are short and twiggy. My shoulders bulge like every child's favorite sledding hill. Those thoughts crept into my consciousness, soaked with vanity. In these moments of piqué-arabesque-chassé-step-leap, I ponder similar thoughts—not of vanity—but of purpose. Now I wish my ankles and legs would be strong enough to sustain my weight when I repeatedly connect with the ground, which I cannot see or anticipate. I wish my shoulders carried the grace of a Russian ballerina or my body the picture of one who has worked hard for this position. I wish my arches did not ache after only two tries at this combination.

I try once more. Piqué: right ball of the foot planted, right arm up, left arm parallel to the ground. Arabesque: left leg straight behind, toe pointed. "You can do better than that," I tell myself. Chassé: a shuffle upstage, arms around an invisible basketball hoop. Step: knee bent to provide force upwards to help my partner lift me. I do not see him. Will he get to me in time? Will his arms be as strong as before? Will his fingers slip? Will our timing be synchronous?

Leap.

The piano continues playing, a slave to the metronome, but I do not hear it. The set below me stays in place, but I do not see it; its abrasive attack of new paint must be able to reach my nose, and yet I do not smell it. My partner's hands are steady on my waist, without which I would not be flying six feet in the air, but I do not feel them. There is another combination of steps to do once I land, but I do not think of them.

My body is the same inept form of bones and muscles it was before, yet in that moment I dance with the poise of an expert. I'm not a baby robin pushed from its nest; I am an eagle, strong and sure, soaring above a river. Suspended in the stratosphere all is calm, and I wish never to return to the hard ground below me.

But, as gravity has always deemed it, I must return. My head jerks back to the scene before me, and I comprehend the quick approaching ground. I'm suddenly reminded of early rehearsals, when my legs buckled beneath my weight because I forgot to do the simple task of looking from the space behind me to the oncoming floor. I once again fear the upcoming steps; they are the same as last time, but on the left side, which is inevitably more difficult. I leap on this side too, but I do not fly as I did before. Instead, I panic at the thought of my leg tensing instead of bending behind me into attitude, and how unrefined that must have looked to the audience.

When I finish, I know the steps were unsatisfactory, but they are done. Our moment ends, and we cross stage left. Fatigued, I fall into a chair just offstage, like a ballet slipper folded in half. The showy, fake smile fades from my face. I wish to be yet again suspended in midair, without a hip locked up in pain, or anatomy flash cards to memorize, or a text from my mother to answer. I wish to be a bird, above all the worries in the world.

An innocent eight-year-old runs up to me and says, "You are the bestest dancer I've ever seen," not knowing the aching muscles and weary mind found in that dancer. He sees in me everything I wish to be. He too is flying, with stars in his eyes, kept afloat by witnessing the marvel of his role models doing the incredible.