

## DANCING IN THE DESERT

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Man is a social animal. It might be easy for him to feel lonely, to think that, after all, he is born and dies alone; he might rush through The City That Never Sleeps in a state of mental torpor, isolated from the other rushing shadows on the streets, somehow untouched by the stories that surround him. But, in the end, he feels the need to share something, to find a connection, to be part of a community. Yet as members of communities we might feel oppressed: our family, our friends, even strangers on the streets have preconceptions about how we should look, act, and ultimately be. And although those are often unconscious, their effect on our identity can be deep, even to the point that we might see an unbridgeable gap between who we are and who we are supposed to be.

In her autobiographical essay "Beauty, When the Other Dancer Is the Self," Alice Walker guides us through her journey to self-acceptance, showing us how she carried the burden of these expectations and eventually freed herself of them. The youngest and self-declared prettiest of the family, Walker is a vivacious little girl with a spirit "bordering on sassiness" until an "accident" occurs: hit by a copper pellet fired by her brother's toy gun, her right eye goes blind (252, 253). However, it's not her partial loss of sight that troubles young Walker but rather the "glob of whitish scar tissue," the "hideous cataract" that appears on her eye (253). She feels pretty no more, and loses her confidence. Afraid of people staring at her, she "does not raise her head" (253). When her family moves, she is unable to integrate into her new school and is sent to her grandparents' house in her old community. Only after six years spent in "*the anguish of never looking up*" does she finally have the "glob" removed (253).

As soon as the "glob" disappears from her face, her assurance comes back. By raising her head again she's able to make friends, get a boyfriend, and even leave school as queen. She doesn't even think about the "bluish crater" where the glob used to be, at least not until another pretty girl, her

daughter, enters her life (254). Walker is afraid that her daughter will notice that her mother is different. But the little girl does something that Walker still hasn't been completely able to do: she accepts what makes her mother unique. Her daughter sees "a world in [that] eye," and Walker realizes that, in it, there is a world indeed (255). In that eye are her childhood adventures; in that eye is the joy of being able to see beautiful things—namely, the desert; in that eye is also evidence of her past—a past that she finally accepts. Thus by embracing her whole being in a romantic, metaphorical dance, she suggests to us what is perhaps the way to happiness: loving the scars that make us who we are.

Unfortunately, this is much easier said than done. As Walker's story shows us, psychological wounds need time—sometimes years, even decades—to heal. Sometimes we think we are fine, but deep inside we are still bleeding. Sometimes we bleed our whole lives, one drop at a time. But if we are strong—or maybe just lucky—we will eventually heal, acquiring a deeper understanding of ourselves. At least, so it was for me.

My childhood ended on a precise day. It was a clear morning in the beginning of January, during my last year of elementary school, when my teacher walked me and three other pupils down the four stories of the building. "It is in difficult moments that friends are most needed," she said, though I didn't understand what was happening. I was surprised when we walked past the principal's office—I imagined one of us was in some trouble. Yet we continued all the way to the entrance. There, after turning the corner, I found my mother and half-sister both in tears. I instantly knew what was going on: after suffering from cancer and leukemia, my father had passed away. For the first time in my life, I had to face death. I remember spilling more tears than I had ever thought possible, spending a whole afternoon in bed, and eventually turning my dry eyes on my mother to give birth to a thought that still surprises me in its determination: "I must be strong for her."

Yet when facing loss and the unknown, determination is perhaps not enough. I may have managed to look strong and relieve my mother from the sorrow of my suffering, but inside I felt weak. I had no idea what my life was going to be like and what, if anything, was *beyond*. I only knew that there was an end and that its darkness scared me. Over the following few years I was little more than a quiet and somewhat lonely boy who looked at his peers'

carefree smiles and wished he was as light-hearted as they were. I had come into contact with something they weren't aware of.

But this turned out to be a blessing as much as it was a curse. Gradually, things began to change. I started to realize that the sorrow I felt was compensated by an open and insightful mind. My experience showed me how deep an emotion can be and how little everyday problems matter when the precariousness of life and the misery of loss confront us. It freed me from dogmatism; it made me realize how everything is relative and multifaceted; it pushed me to investigate and question myself. As Walker's scar taught her "of shame and anger and inner vision," my own wound made me inquire about who I was, both in an existential and in a more ordinary way, leading to many discoveries (255). In the ashes of my sorrow, I finally blossomed. I became confident, self-reliant, proud of having overcome great adversities. I grew strong enough to come to terms with my sexuality.

Even more importantly, I admitted to myself that without this loss I wouldn't have become the person I am. Maybe I felt the emblematic and joyous dream with which Walker closes her essay. Walker dances with herself. In spite of the suffering she has endured, she dances alone but not in loneliness. She discovers the beauty in the desert, a beauty that grows out of the challenges that desolation presents to life, born from affirming oneself over external adversities.

But in the overwhelming thrill of self-affirmation, we might happen to forget about the world. Self-absorption is the continual risk of the self-confident. Therefore, how can we both dance with ourselves and avoid Narcissus? How can we turn these discoveries into the beginning of a path, rather than an end?

In her essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Zora Neale Hurston takes self-acceptance one step further. At the age of 13, Hurston finds her identity challenged and redefined when she moves out of the "Negro town" she was raised in: "against a sharp white background," she becomes colored (159, 160). Yet she doesn't feel sorry for herself; she's excited about having to fight to obtain what she wants and proud of feeling close to her primordial inner forces rather than "pale with . . . whiteness" (161). But after she affirms her individuality, she looks at her story and sees that the "jumble" of which it consists isn't substantially different from the inner story of any other human

being. We are free to write our own destinies of long-lost opportunities, enshrined memories, disappointed expectations, and the mysterious treasure of being alive—Hurston discovers that she belongs to something bigger (161).

In some way, her story is a development of Walker's—the latter's acceptance of self is the premise for the former's insight. While the undeveloped self risks being crushed by the external world, the developed one can stand by itself and grasp the universal meaning of its experience. Like Walker, Hurston dances with herself and can therefore join in a collective, existential ballet. She knows herself and is therefore able to see that the people around her are like her, despite their different colors. She understands that she is part of a "Great Soul" (Hurston 161).

While sharing with us what she's found, Hurston doesn't show us her scars. She only acknowledges that she knows "the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less" (160). If Walker has the incredible ability to take us hand in hand and show us her journey through a number of vivid images and details, Hurston's vagueness is no less powerful. Maybe it's precisely because we know little about her struggles that we can easily make her wisdom our own. Her story might be any of ours—and therefore, so could her discoveries. And once we know ourselves and have seen that our joys and our sorrows are the same as everybody else's, once we have understood that those lucky souls who love themselves dance the notes of similar music, we can realize that we are enfolded in a much bigger, much more beautiful desert.

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#### WORKS CITED

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