

Test Flight

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In his essay “Joyas Voladoras,” Brian Doyle considers the ferocious, “racecar heart” of a hummingbird, who beats its heart and flies at impossible speeds against gravity and reason in search for “that which is sweet” (49). This fluttering bird, tinier than the palm of a child’s hand, with a heart the “size of an infant’s fingernail,” pays the price for its “thunderous, wild” life by suffering more heart attacks than any other living creature (50). The hummingbird lives always on the brink of death, but it also lives more life than anything else—because it flies right smack in the face of its own destruction.

Doyle goes on to compare the hearts of other creatures to that of the hummingbird, bringing up the very familiar and very foreign human heart. Even with “so much held” inside our hearts, we are still, in the end, “utterly open with no one,” perhaps not even with ourselves (50). Doyle suggests that because we cannot “bear to be so naked,” we brick up “thick walls” around our hearts, walls so thick that they inhibit us from ever accessing our most intimate organ. We make ourselves unable to respond, to receive, to trust even our own bodies. With every new brick we pile on the wall, we distance ourselves from the fragile beating on the other side. When the wall is fortified, our hearts are silent. No beating can be heard.

It’s three o’clock in the morning, and I have my head between my legs in a dingy, old studio. The drops of sweat on the linoleum floor are clinging to my body, along with dust bunnies and hair from questionable sources. My friend David lies next to me on his stomach, breathing heavily against the sound of the wind roaring outside the cracked window. I can hear his heart thumping against the floor. We’ve been in here for the past four hours, dancing and improvising movement as the world crashes down with thunder and rain. David has just finished showing me his new acrobatic routine—all handstands, backbends, flips through the air—and is now describing with haggard breath the exhilaration he felt on the flying trapeze with his partner yesterday. I nod, and lift a sore arm to place my hand on my chest, expecting the

same strenuous, passionate pounding I can feel from David's heart. But nothing. No thumping, no hammering, not even a slight whisper of a heartbeat. I wonder if I'm dead or dying. I place a finger under my nose. Still breathing. Okay. Okay.

I know the sound of David's heartbeat better than I know my own. We grew up together, slept through the same biology classes, had the same dance teachers and dance dreams. David is carefree, ambitious, and unafraid of conquering the most impossible tasks with his body. I have never in my life heard him utter the words "I can't." But unlike him, there are a lot of things *I* "can't" do. Can't trust. Can't kick my feet up into a handstand—I always fear they'll never reach the ground again. While David soars every day on his flying trapeze, untouched by gravity, I fall in "Beginner's Tumbling," unable to accomplish the most rudimentary handstand, unable to break down the brick wall of fear I've put up for myself.

I don't know why I'm so terrified. Inside this studio, sandwiched between these four thin walls with paint peeling off in patches, I know I am safe from the outside world. Dance and theater studios have always comforted me. They are rehearsal spaces where one is allowed to make mistakes, where one can explore "that which is sweet" with utter freedom (Doyle 49). They shut out the undesirable, mechanical aspects of life and provide room for liberation, for a flowering of the soul. Yet at the same time, they are insanely scary places to be, for nowhere else will you be ripped open, sewn together, and ripped open again by the limitations of your body and the neuroses of your mind. In these rooms, there exists only you, your body, and the possibility of a heartbeat. You can ignore it, or you can attend.

It is often said that artists exist to feel what others can't afford to feel, or are too afraid to feel. The artist's first task, then, is to conquer her own fear and open up—to tear down the brick wall and hear the ferocious pounding. For an artist to mirror the truth, she must first face the truth in herself, as well as the immeasurable fear that exists in being utterly open. She must be fearless in the face of fear. But it seems impossible, for no human being past her fifth birthday, artist or not, can be so untainted by scars, disappointments, and bloody knees, so unfettered, that she can willingly leap right off the cliff into the unknown. Well, no one except maybe David.

I turn to David. Smiling at me, he gets up from the floor and crosses the room to change the music. His breath has returned to normal; whereas mine is caught somewhere between my stomach and my throat. "Aren't you ever afraid of breaking your neck when you're tumbling in the air?" I ask quietly. He stops what he's doing and hesitates. Perhaps unable to articulate his

answer in clear words, he instead dives into a monologue about the moment right before the fall—that moment of uncertainty and fear—and the moment right after, when gravity takes over and all is well. What’s in the middle, he says, is hard to define: it’s almost as if there is no definite line between fear and fearlessness. And yet, ironically, this gray zone is where the magic happens, where stasis turns into flight and insularity becomes openness. “You have to use your fear,” David says, grinning. “It’s scary, but it’s the thing that propels you.”

Nothing is ever clear cut, one way or the other. In life, there is no black or white, no right or wrong. We cannot clearly define when our love borders on hate, or when our pain is distinctly separate from pleasure. Extremes are simply not practical, not realistic. In the artistic process, then, the goal should not be to have either fear *or* fearlessness, to be open *or* closed. These elements have to exist at the same time, each complementing the other, each fueling the other. In “Joyas Voladoras,” Doyle states that “every creature on earth has approximately two billion heartbeats to spend in a lifetime”; they can either be spent “slowly, like a tortoise,” or “fast like a hummingbird” (50). But the heart, of all things, never works so mechanically. It exists in a gray zone, the organ that sustains our life and the one that most often kills us. And though perhaps I don’t know how fast I’m spending my two billion heartbeats—after all, I can’t even hear my heart beating—I know that in this instance I, too, am living in a gray zone. I am afraid of myself, of my own body. I am a performer, but I am afraid of the only instrument I have.

Gertrude Stein addresses a similar kind of gray zone in *Tender Buttons*, a collection in which she examines objects, foods, and rooms in experimental verse. In “A Box,” Stein meditates on the life, lifelessness, and versatility of a box through seemingly incompatible images. “Lighter” than “weight” itself, the box in one moment seems capable of defying gravity; that it is “winged” means that it, like the hummingbird, is capable of flight. But it doesn’t soar for itself. The box, with its wings open *or* closed, “circulates” for others. In fact, it is so expendable and easily manipulated that it can almost be anything the giver or receiver wants it to be: a gift, a life, “a wedding journey,” a beginning. It literally allows itself to be used vicariously, to be “left open, to be left pounded, to be left closed, to be circulating in summer and winter,” passing through time and space and distance, available to transport anything and “replace any substance” (20). This box, it seems to me, is the very vehicle that artists should strive to become: volatile, malleable, utterly open, free; ready to embody any persona or story, ready for flight.

Interestingly enough, however, Stein's words also provoke other images not found in the text. While a box can provide shelter, protection, and endless possibilities, it is also the very thing that encloses, that suffocates, that cages and *boxes in*. Its wings are at the same time its brick walls: the source of its flight is the very thing that prohibits it from soaring. The box is so open that it can be passed around to anyone, stocked full of another life. Yet it is simultaneously sealed off from the outside world. It is as gray and paradoxical as the human heart.

As experimental theatre director Jerzy Grotowski states in his book *Towards a Poor Theatre*, the artist's process of "revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up" is "paradoxical and borderline," for there is no clear-cut separation between openness and closedness, no black or white. But this is what "epitomizes" the artist's "deepest calling" (68). This paradox within is what all artists must learn to embrace.

Much of modern dance and experimental theatre training stems from the belief that you must listen to what is already there in your body—the fears, the memories, the excitement—before you come into contact with any outside source, such as a partner or a script. Only when the artist listens closely to what is within her can she set out to create art that is honest, art that is powerful. Otherwise, the end result will be contrived, rigid, fake. Of course, this introspection is difficult; we must first break down the thick brick walls around our minds and hearts. In "Joyas Voladoras," Doyle points out that *children*, because of their innocence, can do so naturally and effortlessly. A child can easily "walk through" the heart, live in the "house of the heart," and be comfortable with exploring every aspect of its chambers (50). A child can take in everything, even fear, and embrace it without analyzing or preparing for its blow. Children are unafraid of fear itself; they just *do*, without contemplation or inhibition. Before they learn to grow cautious of falling, they leap. Of course, fear exists for them as well, but what's so courageous is that they, like my childhood friend David, embrace their fear and soar with it, hearts beating wildly in the wind.

In his painting *The Bath, Jávea*, Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida depicts a young, naked girl walking, head held high, against the currents of the sea. She is alone. In the background, two other figures, both clothed, hold onto each other, almost submerged in the water. The girl doesn't seem to care at all about them, instead looking straight ahead, swinging her arms delightfully and fearlessly in her stride toward the heavy waters. Sorolla contrasts her straight, strong back with thick swirls of colors melting into each other, surrounding her with a menacing quicksand. All the elements seem to be against

her, but, with a child's true nature, she is wholly unconcerned. She is walking alone into unknown waters, but she neither hesitates nor looks back.

Most physical acting training aims to teach your body to regain the innocence and fearlessness you had when you were a child. You learn to release your voice, follow your basic instincts, and trust your body. You learn to observe your breath and the speed of your heartbeat. You learn to do a handstand.

As the wind quiets down outside the studio, signaling the end of the storm, I drag my tired body up from the floor, followed by David's supportive gaze, and position myself against the dirty wall to attempt once again a handstand. As I kick up my legs, an overwhelming fear attacks my torso, suffocating me. I stop to check for my heartbeat; still, there's nothing. "Fuck!" I'm half throwing a temper tantrum as I swing my legs up again, hard. And for a second, in a sustained instant of upside-down-ness, I feel as if I am flying. No gravity seems to betray me, nor fear, nor any feeling at all . . . *This is Doyle's "that which is sweet" (49)*. Then, my right foot hits the wall with a loud thump, and the next thing I know, I'm lying on my back, on the floor, with hair in my mouth, gasping for breath.

Just when I'm about to burst into tears from the fear and shock of the fall, David laughs loudly, and I suddenly realize that there is a monster heartbeat tapping out its rhythm in my ears, coursing through my body. I look at him, still the same eight-year-old boy I met in ballet class years ago, and I proceed to do the only thing my eight-year-old self would have done. I laugh.

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