

Anyone who has ever wondered about the path artists follow in pursuit of their art will find *Halflife* an irresistible read. Lorraine Thomson's exploration of dance takes her from the streets of Vancouver to Paris, London, San Francisco, Indonesia and India. It is equally a study in how family shapes the artistic mind, propelling it to address trauma and transform it into something meaningful.

Written in clear and compelling prose, *Halflife* opens a window onto Thomson's rigorous devotion to the study of movement and choreography and leaves the reader with detailed insights into the world of modern dance.

— *Terence Young, author of Give Us This Day*

Animated by her spirit of adventure, her impulse to explore and express, Lorraine Thomson's memoir is a finely detailed portrait of a life lived wide open to the liberating possibilities of the creative process, the creative moment. A pleasure and an inspiration.

— *John Gould, author of The End of Me*

Personally fearless and culturally illuminating, *Halflife* is Part One, perhaps, of a life quest shaped in equal parts by passion, willpower and the sly conspiracies of chance. Through the shared language and disciplines of dance and music, Lorraine Thomson has explored ancient traditions that redefine and challenge her own Western practice, while performing a generational exorcism that climaxes in an almost literal rebirth.

— *Seán Virgo, author of Dibidalen and Waking in Eden*

Halflife is Lorraine Thomson's intimate and vivid story of coming of age through movement. With grit, integrity and an intense creative drive, she overcomes many challenges—physical, psychological, cultural and economic—to live the life of a dance artist. In her journey she mines the expressive body in both Western and Indonesian dance, integrating the worlds of embodiment, emotion and spirituality.

— *Santa Aloi, Professor of Dance, emerita, Simon Fraser University*

HALFLIFE



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HALFLIFE

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HALFLIFE

The Way of the Witness

A Memoir by
Lorraine Thomson

For my husband Michael, without whom this book would never have been attempted. The one who truly sees me like no other.

And for my son Ashlan, who from the moment I clapped eyes on him has brought indescribable joy and balance to my life.

Half-life is the amount of time it takes for one-half of a radioactive isotope to decay. The half-life of a specific radioactive isotope is constant; it is unaffected by conditions and is independent of the initial amount of that isotope.

— *Introductory Chemistry, 1st Canadian Edition*

“The half-life of grief is endless. But that is OK because it is an engine of accomplishment.”

— *Ken Burns, documentary filmmaker*

PROLOGUE

UNDERGROWTH

For my sisters, Alison and Carolyn

God enters through the wound.

— *Carl Jung*

She sees her own breath on the window steaming up the glass. She is on the wrong side. They say she is not quite right. She hopes sooner or later they will realize it isn't true. She hopes for that. So she may be spared the thick yellow medicine that makes her retch. So she may be spared the trip down into the black bowels of the hospital. Acrid carbolic. Gurneys full of old men gasping. Lumps on their heads and spots on their arms. Hard wall tiles echoing the sickly sound of gurney wheels whining. So she may be spared the black metal room where her bare legs are strung up and apart like a chicken being deboned. Her very private parts exposed to men in white, who chat and don't seem to notice her. She is invisible. She waits for the updraft. For lift off. For flight.

One day, her legs in the stirrups, Saran Wrap on her bare widespread legs, she waits. Frozen in position. Embarrassed. Aching. Cold. Ashamed. A woman in white appears with a warm flannelette sheet and drapes it over her strung-up legs. The woman says nothing. She also says nothing. She loves this woman in white. Tears fall into her eyes.

She is like a shuttlecock. Bouncing back and forth between hospital and home. Ping pong, ping pong. Not sure which is better. When she is in one place she wishes for the other. When she gets to the other she wishes for return.

At home she is the pale weak one. Can't wake up in the morning. So sluggish. She is slow moving, slow responding, slow deciding. Her mother continuously telling her to "get a move on!"

In contrast her siblings are energetic and decisive. They are full of beans. They are full of words. She is quiet. Dreamy. Spaced out. She is called the placid, passive one. The way her mother says this, she knows that it indicates another flaw in her. Another part of 'not quite right.' She does not think it is true. She knows it is not true, but it still hurts in her chest to hear it.

There is a deep divide between her and the others. She remains separate. Not allowed to play in the lake for more than five minutes. Not allowed to play in the snow for more than five minutes. Not allowed to take PE. Not allowed to be in school in the afternoons. Often in the hospital. Always getting out just before Christmas. White as a sheet. Frequently rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night from the upstairs bedroom she shares with her younger sister.

Her family cannot 'see' her. Not really. She is designated the sick one. She must look weak. Inside herself she does not feel placid or passive. Just under her freckled skin and in the pit of her stomach she can feel her body working hard. Her awareness stretched to the limit. Alone in her bed on days when the pain is great, she waits. Gathering energy within herself. She is a hollow reed. A lightning rod. An invisible girl.

Being invisible is not the worst of her worries. At home there is the woman who came from Scotland to live with them after her husband died. Who takes care of her and her sisters while their mother is out working full time. This woman is her grandmother. But she does not call her that because she is not anything like the grandmothers of her friends. Their grandmothers give them candy and presents and let them do things their mothers do not let them do. Her grandmother—this woman—has razor-sharp eagle eyes. Eyes that scan for flaws to pounce upon.

A simple case of threads loosening, button dropping off unnoticed as she returns from school equals an act of raging violence.

The woman waiting on the front porch notices the button missing on the white and pink-rose sweater and flies down the steps. Grabs her by the arm. Slap slap. On the back. On the legs. On the head.

With a yank she pulls her arm away from the woman's grip. Gets loose and runs. Almost tripping. Panting. Breath coming fast. The woman right on her tail. She runs as fast as she can. Gasping for air. She runs all the way up the twelve front steps. She should have run round the back of the house. Run. Fly. Breathe. Almost choking, she bounds into the house. Through the big hallway and up the steep stairs to her bedroom. She will close the door on her. She knows this is no real solution. Still, it is crucial to make the attempt. The gesture. She is inside, ahead only by a breath and the enraged woman is furiously fast. Grabs an arm once again. Slaps anywhere she can land her bony hands.

She curls herself up on her bed. Nowhere else to go. Slaps continue rhythmically. She feels the energy go out of her arms. Out of her legs. Out of her torso. Her breath, so fast and pushing out, now slows and turns inward. She battens down the hatches. Lets go the body. She floats away from herself. From the body curled up on the bed, jerking up and down with the slaps.

She removes herself from the sensations and takes refuge within. She knows how to do this. She has done it time and again. She trusts this. Inside herself she sings. Sings a song inside herself to remain calm. A song to become unbreakable. She rests inside the song. Time vanishes.

When she comes back to her body, still curled up on the

bed, the choking sobs subsided, she knows the woman is broken. Breaking herself with each strike. Shattering like glass. While she is enduring. Like a coiled snake, biding her time, waiting. To leave this woman, this moment, to become her whole self.

When she is seven, they put the Nil by Mouth sign on the end of her bed. This means trouble. But what? Another trip to the basement black metal machine room? She waits. Then it comes. Needle in her bum. Time disappears. On waking she hears her own voice echoing. Screaming. Her insides are tearing apart. The nurse comes with the lovely little brown rectangular tray with the hypodermic needle on it. Relief. Sleep. Blackness.

Later, they come to her bed to look at the brown rubber tube sticking out of the round hole they have made in her stomach. This is what they have done. They put long sticks on her arms so she cannot bend to touch the hole or the tube. They did all this. They seem proud of it.

But she can also do things. She has a magic power. When anyone comes into the room, her room, she can have them close, very close and large, or just by thinking it, she can send them far, far out. The room stretches. The walls stretch out. They are very far from her. Miles. And so tiny. She practises this all day when she gets time between sleeping and crying for the good needle. Close and far. Large and tiny. She can do it with the furniture. She can do it with the windows. Even with the rails of her bed. She is really good at it and with the good needle she gets even better at it. She keeps this power very secret. Not telling them. Who knows what they would do if they found out.

Time slips between the cracks of vision as she unfolds her ability. She has no thoughts of home or Mommy or Daddy.

Only silence. A place somewhere between being awake and being asleep. A place even dreams dare not enter. It is her place. Her power.

She can do other things besides the near and far. When you must lie in bed for a very long time and be quite still, you get to know what will happen. You get to know if you listen to the sounds. The nurses never say much. They never tell you anything. You don't even ask. You know ahead of time you won't get a straight answer. Everything is so secretive in the hospital. Secret and mysterious and confusing. So you must listen and learn the codes.

She knows the exact sound of the nurse who brings the good needle. Her shoes squeak on the floor. She knows the rattle of the carrier box which will have the needles for taking blood and she knows the voice of the blood lady. She knows the sound of the wheels of the food trays for breakfast lunch and dinner. When the wheels pass and the dinner lady does not come in, she knows she does not get regular food.

She knows the difference between the Nil by Mouth sign at the head of her bed and the Do Not Feed sign. The first one means needle in the bum, arms waving overhead and up to the operating room. The second one means she will be going to the dungeon black metal X-ray room. It is good to know ahead of time.

When the specific squeaky gurney wheels go past her room, it means someone in the ward will be going for an operation or a procedure in the basement. Wheels stopping at her door brings fear. Wheels going past her door brings sadness.

She knows the ding of the elevator doors opening just down the hallway. If it dings early in the morning it will be doctor rounds. She loves Dr. Hopkins, even though he does the operations. He is round and bald and always smiling. He never

does the nasty scary stuff in the basement. And he looks her in the eye and pats her on the head.

If the elevator dings in the late afternoon or early evening, it will be visiting hours. This means parents. Siblings are not allowed in the ward. She must listen carefully to the footsteps. She knows Mommy's footsteps. The clip of high heels as she approaches. She is so excited. Here she comes. My angel mother. If two heads peek around the door of her room, it is double bliss. Daddy has come too. Wearing his fancy hat and with his moustache shaved off, just for her. Sometimes she cries when she sees them. She cannot say why. It doesn't even matter if there is no brown paper bag full of goodies. They are her goodies today.

After they put something inside her in the surgery, she cannot hold it when she has to pee. Not very much time between feeling the go and just going. Once she is back home, many times she cannot hold it and pees her underpants. The woman hits her with the large wooden spoon because of it.

She always looks forward to the weekends. This is when her mommy and daddy are home. The woman cannot touch her then. She loves watching her mom in the kitchen, baking sweet things to eat. It is so strange when Mommy is swishing and whipping the cake and cookie batter round and round in the heavy mustard-coloured ceramic bowl with the big wooden spoon. The spoon that spends its days lying innocently in the cutlery drawer.

On baking days, she gets to lick it, once Mommy has scraped the batter into the metal cake pans. The spoon becomes a tasty thing, coveted by her and her younger sister. She wants the spoon. She loves the feel of the worn wood on her tongue. She finishes licking it. It is washed and put back

in the drawer. Odd how the next time she sees this same spoon it may be a weapon.

One day, she just can't make it home before it happens and the ugly yellow wool underpants she is made to wear to keep her warm are wet. She takes them off and throws them in a ditch. Thinking she will be spared this time. Think again! Two days later the woman calls her name in that harsh tone. "I have counted the underpants and one is missing from the wash. Where is it?"

Her heart sinks. "I don't know."

She is shut in her room to think about where the underpants are. This is the no-exit zone. If she cannot find them she will be hit. If she says she ditched them she will be hit. If she says she lost them she will be hit. If she could miraculously produce them she will be hit because they are peed in. She paces the room, pretending to look for what will never be found.

In the room next door her older sister has a friend over. Her sister is saying, "My sister is looking for her underwear!"

She hears their laughter and is stung.

She paces her room, not even thinking of what can be done. There is nowhere to hide, nowhere to go. Nothing but breathe and wait and brace for the inevitable. It must be born.

Once again, down in the hospital basement she prays to the ominous air, "Don't let them do it." But then she sees and knows. The big hypodermic needle with the fluorescent pink liquid lies waiting on the shiny metal tray. The hard block of wood will be strapped tight to her stomach. To make her stomach touch her spine.

The needle goes in. She feels sick. She throws up. The men in white are not happy with her. They give her a cardboard container to throw up in, which she does over and over again.

Frustrated, they strap the inserted needle to her arm. Be still, they order. They leave.

She is all alone in the dark black metal machine room. Being still. Feeling sick. They come back to press more pink liquid into her. She feels it cold, running up and over her shoulder, down into her chest, then into her belly. She throws up less this time.

She does not like the white-coat men. They do not touch her in good ways. They strap her down. They poke and press and prod. They insert things into her without warning or reasons. They only order her what to do. They do not even look her in the eyes. To them she is nothing.

They do these things to her because they think she is not quite right. They imagine they are doing good. This black basement is their domain. This is their game. Their choice. Their machines. She obeys their barking orders. Without choice, she retreats into herself. Quiet. Waiting for it to be over. For the unbearably tight strap on her belly to be released. For the sickness to die down. For the peace she will feel when she is in her bed on the ward, waiting for the good needle.

One day the woman finds a toothpaste tube split in the middle. "Who did this? If one of you does not own up to this, I will smack all three of you!"

No one admits to it. The woman likes to have time between the threat of punishment and the punishment itself. So her sisters and her are shut in their rooms to 'think.' They will have only a short time before the weapon comes crashing down on their bottoms. On her own, the woman rages downstairs, waiting to see if she will hit one or three girls.

In their shared room, her younger sister says that one of them must take the blame so all of them do not get smacked. For the greater good. This sounds reasonable. So, she tells

her sister she will do it. She confesses to breaking the toothpaste tube, even though she is innocent. She lies, knowing the result.

Then she waits for the thousand-pound weight to drop. For the stinging to begin. Waiting is worse than the hit. In the middle of the hitting, you know it will be over soon. So, it begins. So, it ends. But sometimes, like this time, the end is not the end. After the beating, after the choking breathless sobs have subsided and the woman has gone downstairs, she is called. She goes down prepared to cringe. For her skin to crawl. This has happened before. The woman says, "You were hit not because of what you did, but because you did not confess right away. I hit you for your own good."

Yeah... right! What the woman says is not true. The deed is always what gets punished. The woman cares for nothing but the deed. Getting clothes dirty or peed or wrecked, or wearing the wrong clothes to play in. Why are these things so important to the woman?

She will never understand this woman. The woman is beyond comprehension.

"Come... we are still friends... yes?"

How dare the woman say such things! No! We are not friends. We never will be friends. Still ringing in her ears are the nasty names the woman calls her when she hits. Dirty midden! Filthy Trollop! Bloody besom!

She is now the enraged one. White hot outrage. White hot shame. White hot revenge coiled up inside of her. She knows the woman is weak. She knows the woman wants forgiving. She will never get it. No forgiving. No forgetting. The woman is slowly losing. Bleeding love away. Almost... well definitely not, but almost, she feels in the centre of her body a tiny tug at her heart for the woman.



When she is in her forties, sitting at her older sister's dining room table, the conversation turns to the woman. "She sure was a tough old bird!" her sister says with a chuckle.

She feels her stomach begin to tighten.

Her sister says, "Well anyway, it is all in the past. It was not that bad, really. I was able to avoid most of it. It doesn't matter now, anyway. We can laugh about it."

She looks daggers at her sister, saying, "How can you say that!"

"Well, you got hit the most because you were too soft and didn't know how to stand up to her."

She tries her best to suppress the outrage and hurt. This remark stings her to the core and she feels a dark old anger. "Listen. I was terrified of her! I was a sick young girl dealing with overwhelming physical issues. I had no agency, no way to prevent those beatings." Her voice becoming strident. She hates this. She loses steam. Suddenly she is quiet. No point. No understanding. The conversation quickly turns to other topics.

Driving home that night, she is astounded. It is as if her sister did not really take in what they endured while growing up.

This sister jumped over it. Swept it aside. Got on with it. Because she could. Because she was the eldest. Because she was not beaten. Because she was well. Because it is *her* nature. She found a simple strategy and a way to dispel suffering that worked for her. Avoid remembering. Keep a tight lid on. Find safety through going forward. Maintain rigid control.

But she cannot step aside. She has to deal with it. Because she was up against the wall. Because she was beaten. Because she was in pain. In a place where there is no possibility of

control. This is her nature. As a child, she deflected defeat through a kind of magic and quiet outrage. She rode the trauma like a storm at sea. Trusting her body. Inside her secret vessel, hidden in the hold, lay gifts waiting in the dark. Biding their time. Underneath pain and fear and mounds of debris. This is where she lived. Where she forgot nothing. Where she suffered. And where she survived.

VANCOUVER

Just before my twenty-fourth birthday I find myself on Burnaby Mountain, standing on a beautiful sprung-wood floor in a large room surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows and mirrors. Outside the windows alder trees sway in the breeze and birds twitter in the branches. I am in a crowd of about forty people, men and women, all of us wearing cloth pinafores with a number on the back and on the front. I am auditioning to enter a relatively new dance program at Simon Fraser University.

The zigzag path to this moment had its beginning four years ago. Fleeing my hometown of Victoria and the thought of weekly Sunday dinners with my parents sent me across the water to the big town of Vancouver. I love my parents but I need to go far enough away to enter the world on my own terms. To 'get out of Dodge.' Out of the memories in that house. Primarily, out from under my mother's dominance, strong judgements and her stubborn view of me as a weak and sick person in constant need of monitoring. I am suffocating under the weight. University seems the clearest path out.

As a teen I liked to tuck myself in a corner of my room with my back against the wall and a book in front of my face. Often admonished by my mother for being anti-social, I could never understand why she required my presence. I could never get a word in edgewise. Strident opinions and heated disagreements flew around the kitchen table like a whirlwind. I was never quick enough to add my thoughts or opinions to the mix. My response was always to escape. To disappear into words and story in the quiet of my room.

I was reading D.H. Lawrence, Somerset Maugham, Thomas Hardy, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and anything else that

caught my attention at the local library. I was particularly enamoured with the romantic poets, Keats and Wordsworth.

I was around thirteen or fourteen when I carved the end of a huge seagull feather to a fine point, dipped the point in the sepia-coloured fountain pen ink I found in my father's workshop and began trying my hand at writing my own poems. When not reading I was content to sit for hours, alone in my room, at an old oak schoolroom desk, churning out flowery poems by candlelight with the tip of the feather on yellow paper.

So when I enter SFU in 1975, I decide to pursue English Literature. I am very vague about what a degree might lead to. Too far in the future to think about. Just the thought of studying and learning and having a place of my own is enough of an incentive. A grand pursuit.

Across the water, I find a tiny basement suite in a house in Burnaby, at the bottom of the hill, below the university. They are asking \$75.00 a month, which is within my limited budget. I take it enthusiastically. When I say basement suite, I mean it is dark. It is almost entirely underground. Through the only window, I can see people's feet and ankles as they pass the house. Making it even darker is the horrible deep-maroon wall-to-wall carpet.

'Suite' is a misnomer. There is only one room with a bed in one corner and a rickety card table with a hotplate on it in the opposite corner. Beyond the bathroom just outside the room—with a toilet and a small sink—is the remaining unfinished basement. I have to shower at the gym on campus.

But almost as soon as I move into this depressing little space, out of the gloom comes trotting a brilliant light in the form of a cat. He belongs to the people who live upstairs, in the rest of the house. Simba is like no other cat I have seen. He is an Abyssinian, which I have never heard of. He has

rich, chestnut-brown short hair and luminous golden eyes. He looks like a little cougar. He makes me feel welcome and at home. He decides my room is his room. A room he is willing to share with me. He sleeps with me every night, purring his head off. He rubs up against my legs when I return from school. He brings dead mice and lays them on the bed to show off his formidable hunting prowess. He is content to watch whatever I am doing, and if he thinks I am looking at him he turns somersaults over and over to impress me. I love him as if he is my own.

Other than ramen soup cooked on the hotplate and jam sandwiches, I eat all my meals at the campus cafeteria. Good and healthy food is not a concern. I am not sure what constitutes good food anyway. I am simply happy to be busting out of the mince, cabbage and potato dinners I endured at home.

The English courses I signed up for are all stimulating and marvellous. I am pleased to be expanding my reading palette to include Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, Spenser, Milton, Dante, Shakespeare and Chaucer. My understanding and love of writers and writing deepens.

But after completing two semesters of English courses, it occurs to me that we are only reading male writers. Even on my own I have been reading primarily male writers and poets. This strikes me as a deep flaw in my outlook. A defect in the classes I am taking. I decide to do something about it, perusing the library for female novelists and poets. Soon I'm inhaling Virginia Woolf, George Eliot, Adrienne Rich, Margaret Lawrence, Alice Munro, Susan Griffin, Willa Cather, Jane Austen and Edith Wharton.

Since SFU is on the tri-semester system, I take five courses a semester for five semesters in a row without taking a break.

My electives include I-Ching, medieval history, geology, kinesiology, and quite a few psych courses.

Eventually the thrill of university begins to fade. One day, as Simba looks on from the comfort of my unmade bed in the corner while I prepare my meagre meal, I realize I'm tired of the constant grind of studying. It's my fifth semester and my GPA has plummeted. I have no idea how to drop a course and so I just stop going to a class I am bored with, thinking that is that, and now I have an F on my transcript. I fail to answer an essay question correctly on an English final exam that represents most of the mark, and there is a D beside the F.

I know I messed up with the F. But I am confused about the D. I wrote a really good essay for the English exam on my very favourite author, D.H. Lawrence. But when I challenge the D the professor says, "The essay was very well written but you neither understood nor answered the question. If you cannot properly read an essay question you should think about whether you belong here or not."

I leave his office deflated. And I do think about receiving a D and an F in one semester. It makes me feel like a failure. Academic fulfillment has hit a hard rock. As I think more about it, I am forced to admit that my energy to focus and concentrate has been waning for some time. My grand university endeavour is grinding to a halt.

I make a decisive move, take a leap sideways, pack it in and get a job. I have completed just over two years' worth of an English major, Psychology minor degree (minus the F). I imagine it will be possible to return later, if that is in the cards.

I quit university and without any experience easily land a job as a teller at a bank. My brother-in-law Rick works at a bank and gives me the recommendation. My parents are well

pleased. In their eyes it is a secure and respectable job. Even though I feel a bit disappointed with myself, I do feel relief, and I appreciate the decent pay and benefits the bank job provides. And I am ready to upgrade my living situation even though it means saying goodbye to my darling Simba.

I find a very average studio apartment in New Westminster near the bank. Student life has disappeared to be replaced by full-time work, financial security and a rigid schedule, with free time only on evenings and weekends.

During this time I get engaged to my high-school sweetheart, Mark. It seems the natural thing to do. We have been dating off and on since I was sixteen. I always imagined we would end up as a married couple even though we have been apart for close to two years while I went to university and he went pretty much AWOL to work on the pipeline in Leduc, Alberta. When he returns to B.C. a decision is made to take the plunge. My parents are overjoyed. I have joined the ranks of responsible adulthood in the tradition of the family. I have a fiancé and a bank job.

I have left behind the stresses, low income and crappy food of university life, but stresses of a different and more complex kind creep in. We marry in the summer of 1977. In the first year of our marriage it slowly dawns on me that this ordered life of 9-to-5 work does not fit my skin. Although I love my husband, he does not really fit my skin either. At least he does not fit the deepest aspect of who I imagine myself to be or the life I dream about.



For a couple of years, I am married and working at the bank, my mood dominated by a rather bleak and static feeling. I hate working at the bank. I feel constricted and empty and

increasingly distant from my husband and my married life. Mark has started to drink and I am having a hard time with it. He is never violent or angry, but he drinks most evenings until he passes out, and he refuses to talk about it in the morning. He starts his own painting company, but it isn't doing very well. The feelings between us begin to shift. My thoughts are being rearranged into a new pattern. This process is glacial and just slightly out of view of my conscious awareness.

In the meantime, we go to a tiny restaurant around the corner from the bank every Friday night after work. It is so small that there is only the chef, who is the owner, and one waitress. The waitress and I constantly chat and I find out that she is a dancer.

I talk to her about my early experience of ballet. "At eight years old, I bugged my mother to let me take a ballet class at the local women's institute just down the road from our house. She allowed it. I loved it! The discipline, the piano music, the poses and oh, the lovely soft pink leather shoes. I was in heaven. But I became ill after just a few months and had to quit. I was not allowed to go back because of my health. I always wished that I had been able to continue."

Teri and I become fast friends and begin to see each other outside of the restaurant. She is an exuberant and eccentric character. A much-needed spark in my otherwise unhappy life. I spend time with her whenever I get the chance. And out of nowhere, a sharp and unforeseen curve appears in my path.

One day she invites me down to her neck of the woods to see a modern dance performance. I don't even know what that is. I have never seen modern dance. I have only seen ballet and tap. We bus to Fourth Avenue in Kitsilano, to the Paula

Ross Dance Studio. The piece is called *Coming Together*, the music composed by Frederic Rzewski.

We enter a small dimly lit rehearsal space with a wooden makeshift stage and seating for only about fifty people. We sit in the first row. Very close to the stage. The house lights go down. Stage lights come up. Ten bodies enter the space. Men and women, all wearing bell-bottom jeans and denim shirts, come to a standstill, eyes staring straight ahead. Then very slowly they begin to bounce up and down on the spot, very close together. My heart begins to race and I go still. Something about to happen sweeps over me.

The music begins, repetitive and rhythmic. A man's voice begins to speak. His voice is also repetitive and rhythmic. The dancers bounce higher, with more intensity. The male voice is full of urgency and purpose. The dancers pound their bare feet on the floor as they bounce away from one another and break into units of two or three. Some coming close to the audience and some going farther away.

The text and the music swell as the dancers move back and forth. Sometimes one picks another up then drops him or her back down. Sometimes they clump very tightly together, all the while continuing to bounce up and down.

I have never seen anything like it. Transfixed, I begin to sway in response to their bodies moving back and forth and up and down. My whole body is moving internally. Time seems to disappear in the wake of their hypnotic bounce.

Teri whispers in my ear, "You need to dance. You have it in you. I can feel it just sitting beside you."

"But I'm too old," I say. "I'm twenty-three. You have to start as a child."

"Not so. Not in modern dance. The main female dancer up

there is twenty-five and she just started a few years ago. It is more than possible.”

Something sleeping in a forgotten corner of my being has been woken. A powerful change takes hold of me.

Over the next months, I go to all the modern dance classes I can find in the city. Teri announces she has entered a brand-new dance program at SFU. She invites me to come watch some of her classes.

Teri’s example and encouragement allow me to imagine new possibilities. Exit banking and personal stasis. Before I really know what I am doing I quit my bank job and sign up for the audition to join the dance program.

SFU Dance

So here, on that sprung floor in that beautiful room with the tall windows and shiny wooden floor on Burnaby Mountain, forty or so of us stand in a clump, excited and full of nervous energy in our numbered pinafores. Waiting to do whatever it takes. We are asked to improvise. We are asked to move to music and to perform dance sequences. I am not afraid to take a chance. So many years of being physically restricted due to illness, medical advice, and parental caution has created in me a lust for flying about and letting go. I push myself out, all my body parts flapping, and by the end of the long day I have been chosen, along with a handful of others. I have been accepted into the program. I am busting with pride and excitement and surprise. They enrol me in second year, perhaps because I am considered a mature student, perhaps because I have accumulated most of the elective credits I will need for

a degree. I imagine it is also partially due to my enthusiastic spark.



When I tell my parents I have quit the bank and am returning to university to take a dance degree, my father says, “Oh, really?” My mother says, “Why would you quit such a great job? A dance degree? What about your health? You might get sick. It is certainly not for you.”

Perhaps it is unreasonable of me to imagine they’d be happy about my return to university. I can see by their faces they are not on board with this new decision. Always concerned about my financial stability, it’s clear they consider this move an unnecessary detour in my life. My mother ends the conversation: “How can you take dance at university? It is not a serious vocation let alone worthy of a university degree. How can it lead anywhere? Besides, you are so uncoordinated.”

I understand my parents’ scepticism. It is a new idea for me too, that dance can qualify as a university-level degree, and even harder to imagine what a dance degree will actually involve, but I do understand that it is a serious vocation. I’m sure my mother thinks that dancing is simply prancing around, having fun, perhaps getting ‘in shape,’ or learning to be graceful. In essence her opinion is that this endeavour is my way of avoiding growing up and accepting the social and financial responsibilities of ‘real’ life.

My mother’s concern about my health figures. I was warned off physical pursuits by doctors throughout my childhood and she is still the keeper of that dictum. Still worried. I was born with a defect in my urinary track that infected and damaged my kidneys. The doctors performed experimental surgery on me to save my life when I was two years old. The original

damage left me with only one functioning kidney. They gave me a twenty-percent chance of survival. Because I was so young and physically unformed, they needed to perform more surgeries as I grew. A major operation when I was four and another when I was seven years old. I underwent secondary surgeries where they had to repair my urethra when it became twisted, causing pain. I was in and out of the hospital until I turned twelve. The doctors told my parents that I must stay on daily medication for the rest of my life. As a result, from the age of two, I have been on strong antibiotics and other medications to keep me free from infection. The physical trauma for me as a child was and continues to be an emotional trauma for my parents. Especially for my mother. She can never really let go of worry.

One afternoon while drinking coffee together in her kitchen, Teri announces, "We are moving to Chicago. John landed a great position as a stockbroker in the trade industry there. This is what he always wanted. I guess I can pretty much dance anywhere. But I'll miss it here. I will miss you and all my other good friends."

"When are you leaving?"

"Next week."

I'm bewildered by the suddenness, but I say, "That's great for John. I hope it works for you as well. You know, I bet the dance scene there is super vibrant. But I will miss you too!"

We hug in the middle of the kitchen floor and agree to keep connected through letters. I am sad to see her go. She has had such an impact on me.

Changes continue. Mark and I have made the decision to split up. The relationship is not working for me. And I think there is some part of him that wants to be free of me so he can go fully into the darkness he seems to be heading towards.

Our parting is not acrimonious or difficult and we go our separate ways. I still care for him.

My parents are disappointed with this news. They already think I have made a mistake quitting the bank. And enrolling in dance. This is another failure on top of those. I have not told them about Mark's drinking.

Making matters worse, I am not feeling well. Even with all the antibiotics I swallow, I'm getting more frequent and painful bladder infections. I find a new urologist willing to take me on. I do not like him much. He is patronizing and arrogant. But he gets me off all meds, blaming the continual use of drugs for seriously atrophying my immune system, making the bladder infections more intense.

Suddenly I'm off non-stop daily medication for the first time since I was two. I take antibiotics only if I get an infection and only for five days. The infections begin to decrease. I cannot believe how good I feel, simply to be off drugs! I have so much extra energy. Gone is the strange heaviness I have felt in my limbs for as long as I can remember.



In 1980 I enter SFU for the second time. I am happy to be back on campus and full of hope that this time I will manage to complete a degree. I am raring to go! But once I begin classes my hope turns to uncertainty. I am not at the level of everybody else. Dancing with second-year students shows me I am, in point of fact, without exaggeration, the worst in the class. The other dance students have been in training here for over a year. I have only been dancing for six months. I fall. I have no grace. I have no technique. I have no idea how to balance. To my severe annoyance, it seems my mother is right about one thing. I am indeed uncoordinated.

One day we are asked to balance on our toes and stand still. The teacher walks behind me and says close to my ear, “The only thing keeping you up is willpower. Your body is uninvolved. If not for mind over matter you would fall right over.” She whispers so I am not humiliated in front of the others. She smiles a wry smile, then shakes her head in disbelief. I know she likes me. I think she admires my tenacity.

Another teacher says I have too much energy to dance—a confusing criticism. What I believe he means is that I do not know how to contain, direct or focus my energy into movement. My body is floppy and my limbs are all over the place. Energy is certainly what one needs in order to dance but this energy needs to be harnessed. Control must be present. I have, as yet, none of this.

I love the classes even though I am lagging behind the other students both physically and in terms of understanding. In spite of my technical inabilities, I feel an unshakable determination to push on and rise to this challenge. Dance becomes my entire focus. I have been bitten.

After a few months we begin to explore compositional skills. I really don’t know what is going on. I am at sea. I do my best to string together movements learned in technique class in a smooth and organic, perhaps even a unique way.

The presentation of my very first composition in front of the whole class is today. I am scared and nervous but I have memorized what I have spliced together and I execute it without mistakes. After I finish, I am pleased and sit on the floor beside my fellow students.

“That was nicely done, Lorraine,” the teacher says, “but I do not see any of you in this composition.”

I say nothing in return. Once again, somehow, I don’t get it. I struggle not to burst into tears right there in the classroom.

I don't know how to follow compositional ideas and concepts. I am completely mystified. What she has said makes no sense to me.

"How can a dance composition have anything to do with me, personally?" I complain to my new friend Kai, while we're eating lunch together. "What was wrong with what I did?"

"Well, you did it very well, as she said... but I think she wants more from all of us. Like maybe... what is YOUR movement? I don't really know."

"Yeah... I guess. I need to think about that."

Classes continue and I trek up and down the mountain, but something else is happening. My body is transforming. Week by week and month by month, the shape of my body is changing. I have never seen definition in my leg muscles before. My flesh is becoming taut, and fairly quickly I begin to feel strength invade my limbs.

I have long regarded myself as physically weak, the pale girl never given the opportunity to test her body's limits. I have never imagined I have either physical ability or physical strength. Now, suddenly, in this place built just fifteen years ago with a view of forests when it's not raining, I am able to do physical things I never thought possible. I feel tall, strong and resilient. A delicious, new and growing feeling of power tells me that I can, and will, rise above my 'not quite right' physical past and begin to fly.

Tangle

We hear often from faculty how special the SFU Centre for the Arts is and how fortunate we are to be part of this unique, interdisciplinary dance program, the first of its kind in Canada.

Indeed, we are exposed to a full spectrum of creative arts, expected and encouraged to dive into other disciplines. All dance students have immediate access to all the other arts. All art students readily intermingle, connect and collaborate with each other. There is a rich tangle of influence.

In addition to the required daily modern dance classes which include instruction in improvisation and composition, I am taking weekly ballet classes, a dance history course, a film studies course, an Arts in Context course which is a survey of fine art painting, a technical theatre course where we learn about lighting and set making, and a Criticism of Performance course, for which we attend theatre productions, films, music and dance performances and gallery art shows, writing essays on our responses and analyses of these events.

“You are not simply being trained to be excellent dancers,” we are told, “you are encouraged to become creators.”

I have landed in a brand-new world. My head is exploding, my body vibrating and my heart skipping. I am on fire, with sparks flying in so many directions. I have been dropped from a limited physical world into a wide-open field of electric physical possibility. From the sickly girl who knew all along that she did not end at her fingertips and toes but extended into the blissful and terrifying unknown, I am just where I want to be. Feeding my soul with a cornucopia of art practice. I have caught the tail of a comet. I am being inducted into the creative trajectory of art.

One of my main endeavours at this point in time, is to understand how to plumb the deeper connection between the body and movement. I start thinking about how movement can arise from the inside and travel out rather than coming from the outside and remaining on the surface. I have been noting the difference between student dancers and more

seasoned dancers in performance. The difference is crystal clear. Student dancers often appear unattached to the movements they are executing even if their technique is fairly high. Seasoned dancers, on the other hand, seem to ‘own’ the movement. They ‘become’ the movement. It does not happen in every instance. I imagine this to be a mysterious, almost alchemical process. I am determined to find a way towards achieving this for myself.



In one of my first choreographic modules I pair up with a musician to co-create a piece and right away he starts talking about ring modulation.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but I am intrigued,” I say.

Kenneth and I become friends and I spend time under the theatre in a couple of rooms full of recording equipment and strange-looking machines. “Wow... what do all these do?”

Kenneth grins. “This is electronic music. Electronic music means electronic equipment. Here you have the Serge synthesiser, the Buchla machine and the Moog synthesiser.” He does his best to explain to me how the machines work but I can’t hang onto the details or to any understanding of what it means in musical terms. I sort of drift off while he is explaining.

“Well, great names!” I say.

Then Kenneth points to a small dark room in one corner of the basement. “And that is where communications professor Barry Truax is working on an experimental compositional tool – a really interesting program using sine waves.”

“Oh yeah, I think I’ve seen him turning dials on a machine.

Flashing green squiggly lines and weird beeps? I wondered what he was doing.”

“What he is doing is stretching sound waves out in various ways to reveal tiny, inaudible signals embedded within the wave,” Kenneth says. “You know, it can take anywhere from a few hours to the whole night to process just a single sound.”

“Wow. That sounds extreme!”

“Yes... but the results can be amazing. The system is called granular synthesis. Computer music composers come from all over to use it.”

The word granular conjures up the tactile and physical senses for me. I say, “I like the sound of ‘granular,’ but I still don’t really understand what computer music is.”

“Well... computer music is fairly new,” Kenneth replies. “Computers had their original use in the military. You know... weapons systems and all that. Now composers are starting to apply computers to music. It is a wonderful turnaround. A political act, in a way. Using computers as tools to create art rather than weapons! It is amazing what they can do! The technology is exciting!”

His beautiful green eyes are wide open and sparkling. I stand still, rather in awe of him. I don’t completely get it, but his enthusiasm is infectious. “That sounds wonderful! I look forward to hearing what you can do with it!”

Soon I get the chance to hear what one musician is doing with textures made up of clusters of sine tones. Walter Branchi, a well-known composer from Italy, is here working with Barry’s compositional system. When I hear he intends to present the resulting composition, *From the Corner of a Cloud*, at an off-campus performance space, I am eager to attend.

The piece begins very slowly and quietly and I sink into