

"Hep"

Mary Pinard



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Air an instrument of the tongue,
The tongue an instrument
Of the body. The body
An instrument of spirit,
The spirit a being of the air.

—Robert Pinsky

It was probably in spring, 1962, when I first saw her. It would have been in the slightly dim den of our house in Seattle, where my recently widowed father and I spent almost every Sunday night watching *The Ed Sullivan Show* on TV. It would have been grainy through the glow of black and white, but in my memory, the woman on the flying trapeze was a jeweled bird: rare, daring, free.

Rapt, I watched her—raven-black hair loose down her back, her body glittering in sequin flashes as she grasped the slim bar, then on tiptoes leaping off the high and impossibly tiny platform, swinging into a graceful arc across the netless stage, and then somehow, while swinging, she shifted her position to dangle from her knees, still swinging, and she reached her long arms up, her back arching until she reached for a thin but muscular man in a leotard swinging even higher who, from his own bar and upside down, caught her by her wrists, drawing her easily off her bar, and together, they then swung, like some long human necklace undone, through the air, back, and then, in the middle and in midair, he let her go, lifting her up just slightly, as he did to start her whirling through a half turn in perfect time for her to meet her own bar again, appearing from nowhere it seemed, and just under her fingers, which she simply hooked over the bar, and continued, swinging from it back to the tiny platform that only came once again into view as her pointed toes touched it, and while the rest of her body followed, she let the bar swing empty behind her, and she turned to face us, smiling, so beautiful, holding up one arm, waving.

I was five at the time, and like most kids, I'd been asked by adults, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Though I'd never had a ready answer—one knows everything and nothing at the age of five—once I'd seen the flying trapeze artist on TV, I knew my answer. But it would be over forty years before I ever said it out loud to anyone, or gave it a try.

The word *trapeze* originates with the Greek *trapezion*, which literally means small table, and happens to describe quite accurately the quadrilateral shape formed by a crane bar and a trapeze bar across the shorter ends, and the two linking lines along the longer sides. While our contemporary sense of the circus wouldn't be complete without a

trapeze act, the first trapeze wasn't invented until 1859, when, for twelve breathtaking minutes and without falling through the net-free air of the Cirque Napoleon in Paris, Jules Léotard, age twenty-one, performed on a rig featuring three trapezes. Swinging and leaping from one to the next, and at some point successfully completing the first midair flying trapeze somersault, Léotard found that his long, lonely practices had paid off. Bored with what his father's rather conventional gymnasium had to offer—his father taught gymnastics for a living—Léotard had for some time retreated to the swimming pool, where he suspended a horizontal bar from some ventilator cords and set to work to perfect his aerial tricks (and their inverse, falling) above and into the water. When he transferred these release and flight patterns to larger, less watery performance spaces, he placed a series of mattresses on a raised runway to offer his audiences a better view (Kissell).

Léotard also found incredible fame. He became one of the world's first superstars, appearing over the next ten years or so in several European capitals, as well as in the United States, until his untimely death in 1870, apparently from small pox (Bolton). According to an eyewitness account of one of Léotard's performances by G. Strehly, author of *L'Acrobatie et les acrobates*,

This "saltimbanque" was the king of fashion. It's hard to believe the welcome he received in Paris. When there is not much politics, the public's passion looks for an object. For a while, Léotard was that object. He caused a storm everywhere. There were queues to get into the Circus; people fought for seats. In addition, advertising assured that the artist's name was in vogue, and we saw the appearance of Léotard cravats, Léotard walking sticks, Léotard brooches. (qtd. in Bolton)

King of fashion indeed. If that name, *Léotard*, puts you in mind of lithe musculature and ease of motion for limb and torso, you'll understand now since there's a reason. As if it weren't enough to invent the apparatus and its artful tricks, Léotard also designed the skintight, one-piece garment, that marvel of functionality and flair that bears his name and has become synonymous with the practice of acrobatics and dance.

And isn't it a kind of second skin for flyers? The merest, modest cover, and at the same time, the boldest pronouncement of those shapely limbs, the thick torso, a ribbed purse for the heart? That we have over the decades, since its first appearance on its creator's frame, encumbered and encrusted it with all manner of feathers, rhinestones, metallic threads and wire, invisible seams, rickrack, rip-stop, and Velcro fasteners, suggests perhaps that we want to elevate those who wear the leotard to the status of birds, or even angels—in any case, we desire a being possessed of a fragile beauty but inspired by a strong heart and pure courage. Someone who dazzles us with daring.

Ever since I can remember, I wanted to fly. And not with the help of anything mechanical or pharmaceutical—I wanted my *body*, on its own, to fly. I understood very early on that this presented certain obstacles, and I began to imagine ways to overcome them. I also understood that these flights of fancy were better kept to myself—there was no telling what kinds of limits the adults in my life might impose on me should they ever discover what, literally, I had going through my mind. They always seemed to have visions of potential danger going through theirs. But there was also for me a kind of delight, a delicious mischief in holding back my dangerous wish to make and take flight: by keeping it entirely to myself, it became entirely mine. I had complete control over its design, its rules, its costumes, its physics, its destiny: in a word I was its creator. And perhaps this was my first experience with art, if art is in fact the expression of what is beautiful, or at least of something with more than ordinary significance.

Regardless, I spent considerable time practicing in my backyard some of the skills that made sense for someone who wanted to fly—knee hanging, flipping, and swinging—on a set of rusting jungle gym bars equipped with one worn wooden swing. I set mostly impossible goals for myself, always pushing to achieve the longest dangle (preparation for vertigo and varieties of dizziness, but also an effort to test whether my so-called rib cage could potentially unlock itself and if so, what might that feel like); the most consecutive revolutions starting from a sitting straddle on top of the bar (I called these “pancakes” and considered mastery of momentum their most significant result); and

the highest possible arc for seated swings. In the case of swinging, for example, the idea was to pump forward (swing back), pump forward (swing farther back), and pump pumping pumping pump-pump high enough so I could swing, still seated, all the way over the top of the horizontal bar, my long hair drawing a wavy but perfect circle behind me. Success in this case eluded me, but I was undeterred. I pursued other flight preparation endeavors.

I took to watching birds, perhaps the first teachers I chose on my own for my own purposes, since they appeared to have perfected not only the act of flying, but also varieties of plumage and posture to accent it aptly. Plus, birds were plentiful in my yard, especially robins. I must note too that at the time there was a cartoon show I loved on TV called *Heckle and Jeckle*, which featured two wise-cracking magpies who were wilier, brainier, and funnier than anyone in their animated world (or my real world, for that matter); they were also expert flyers and could banter with the greatest of ease, even while on the wing. I suspect it grew from some combination of the real and the cartoon, that first image I created of myself as a flyer: it took shape as a small but sturdy reddish-feathered bird, not much taller than my five-year-old self, and with a compact suitcase packed with a few provisions and hooked under the flexible tip of my right wing. When the time was right—and that meant a cloudless sunny day, not anything very usual in Seattle—I would look up, bend my skinny bird knees, and take flight with no effort or fear or regret. In my mind's eye, I watched myself from the ground as my ever-shrinking figure wing-flapped up and up and away, my threadlike claws dangling, and finally disappearing into the deep blue sky. Why did I want to fly? And where did I think I was going, or what, to ask it another way, was I leaving?

Some who have never flown on a trapeze—or even *thought* about it—might assume that those who do are either professional circus performers, or simply daft, attention-seeking daredevils motivated by bravado, impetuous folly, or even an unconscious death wish. Why else would anyone *choose* to do something so perilous, maybe even crazy? There have been studies conducted, especially in the areas of personality research and anthropology, to explore why people take

dangerous chances. Lisa Hofsess, an ex-professional aerialist and college professor, completed psychological research into trapeze artists and risk-taking for her degree in kinesiology at Iowa State University in 1984. Hofsess found her subjects among the Denver Imperial Flyers, one of the oldest continually operating trapeze groups in the world. For her control group, Hofsess used a YMCA aerobic exercise class. After administering a battery of tests and interviews to both groups, her results revealed that nonflyers are different from flyers. Flyers expressed that being out of control, disoriented, and dizzy were unpleasant feelings that they did not seek or enjoy. While they wanted to be at the physical limits of what their bodies could do, they were not interested in putting themselves in danger or taking unsafe risks (Barbour 6). In fact, their main goal was mastery, a sense of accomplishment or challenge, not only in terms of the immediate environment—the trapeze, the rig from which it is suspended, and the net—but also in terms of unrelated events.

In addition to mastery, members of the Denver Imperial Flyers reported that they experienced deep excitement while flying and appreciated the aesthetic beauty of the motion and movement it entails. I was particularly interested in what Hofsess wrote in her study about the flyers' responses when asked what they would miss the most if they were no longer able to fly. Most said it would be the social interaction. From spending time with a group of flyers, even if they came from very different backgrounds and circumstances, or only met to fly together, they felt mutual respect, affection, and trust. Some even spoke of the ways in which flying and the control and calm it required them to practice and master helped them gain satisfaction and self-esteem. Hofsess reports:

Within the course of the interviews, which focused on cognitive and affective processes during flying, several flyers volunteered details of traumatic personal incidents including rape, parental abuse, and severe physical injury, most commonly from automobile accidents. Without exception, and without prompting, they claimed that their involvement within the emotionally supportive atmosphere of flying facilitated psychological management of the (psychological) injury caused by the reported trauma. (16)

Apparently, the flyers also made frequent references to "family" in describing their closeness with one another, and one flyer offered that maybe they should wear feathers (Barbour 6).

For my forty-seventh birthday in 2003, my stepdaughter gave me a certificate for one flying trapeze lesson on an outdoor rig along the Hudson River in New York City. I was thrilled and grateful, but also completely flabbergasted. "How did you know I wanted to fly on a trapeze?" I asked. She looked at me with disbelief—it felt a little searing actually—then shook her head slowly, saying with a hint of skepticism, "You've only been talking about it for years. How could I not know?" I was pretty sure that I'd gotten over my youthful determination to keep most things that I considered important to myself, which mostly meant hidden from adults. But I guess on some level I must have believed that my "secret" wish to fly had stayed tucked away deep inside. Here, though, was evidence that it hadn't, and in the shape of a gift certificate for a flying trapeze lesson. I must not have been able finally to hold my secret secret. Without my actually realizing it, I had not only given it words—I *want to fly, I want to fly on a trapeze*—but I had said it out loud, and in the presence of my stepdaughter. What else could I do but schedule a lesson?

The act of flying on a trapeze is, like so many artful activities, much harder than it looks. Part of its art is making it look easy. Part of its art is its discipline, its exacting and precise use of the human body to create fluidity and the illusion of weightlessness and flight. When I first saw the female flying trapeze artist on TV, I thought she was flying—it was that suggestive of the real thing. What I've understood by attempting to fly on a trapeze myself is how its fluidity depends on particular physical skills, precise timing, exacting focus, and sustained courage and calm. There is also considerable pain involved in this art—hands blistered and ripped, calves seared by net burns, fingers dislocated, muscles torqued—not to mention the discomforts more specific to an older flyer, like embarrassment at failing a trick, or regret due to a permanently inflexible hip, or the fallibility attendant with the loss of stamina.

When I went for my first lesson, it was a perfect spring day in New York City—cloudless cornflower-blue sky, just enough sun to warm

my face, hands, and feet (the only bare skin showing beyond the delicate neck, sleeve, and ankle hems of my leotard), and a slight breeze off the water. The outdoor rig at the Trapeze School New York is situated along the Hudson River, just about at Canal Street, so flyers have a great view of the surrounding sites, and those out for a walk along the river have an equally great view of the flyers: thus regardless of your level of skill or experience, you are bound to have an audience. Everyone receives basic information about correct positioning for the body, especially the shoulders, arms, and feet, as well as safety training. I remember feeling astonished at how brief this portion of the lesson was; I hadn't been there twenty minutes before I was climbing the twenty-four-foot metal ladder to the impossibly tiny platform, a safety belt cinched around my waist, and chalk dust keeping my palms dry, at least for the moment.

I don't remember exactly the last time I saw my mother, but there is somewhere inside me the mark of memory that tells me that the last thing I saw her *do* was wave to me. It was clearly a moment of departure, but not one that I, or anyone else at the time, could have recognized as so very final. She and my father left for a vacation trip by car to southern California in early February 1962, leaving my three older brothers, myself, and my younger sister at home with our great-aunts, Alice and Estelle. We loved them, as we knew our parents did; in fact we thought of them as doting second parents. It wasn't until many years later that I learned how accurate an appellation that was since they had acted as "parents" for my mother when her parents died by the time she was nine, leaving her an orphan in their care. When she turned ten, they brought her to Seattle from where she had been living in a small town in Minnesota, and she started a new life as a niece. Alice and Estelle were nimble in the midst of loss, accustomed to filling at least some of the gaps left in its wake.

So when the phone rang at our house in Seattle on that wintry day in late February with news that my parents had been in a serious car accident in Bakersfield, California, just at the start of their journey home, my great-aunts were stoic. But not for long. When they learned that their niece had in fact been killed in the wreck, and her husband seriously injured, they wept, and I wept to see their

tears, though not because I knew the truth. In fact, years would pass before anyone told me the details of my mother's death earlier that day, how she had been thrown from the car, literally flown out of it as it flipped over and over in air, and how she was found in the end, underneath it, mortally injured. Instead of explaining the situation to me and preparing me for its long, long result, however, my great-aunts made up stories.

"Oh, she's not coming home for now."

"Well, when will she be home?"

"Oh, we're not sure, but you'll see her eventually."

"Well, where will I see her?"

"Oh, look in this holy book, the one that shows us God and all his heavens—see this picture of a line of beautiful angels, singing? That's where your mother is, what she's doing, and that's where she'll be, for a while anyway."

I have a distinct memory of scrutinizing this picture, trying to find, then to imagine, my mother among this line of female strangers dressed in shapeless white robes. I recall what might have then been my first experience of skepticism as I noted that all these so-called angels were blond, and I knew my mother's hair was as black as a raven's.

After that day, everything turned, and turned upside down. And all that kept me focused was waiting for my missing mother to return: hours sitting at the downstairs picture window that faced the street, hours watching, hours listening for a key in the door, hours wandering around my yard checking for traces of her, hours, like some detective, spying on anyone who even slightly resembled my mother, then hours more spying on anyone who *didn't* resemble my vanished mother, since who knew? She could be a runaway, escapee, fugitive, hiding, wearing a disguise; maybe, maybe because she'd decided she didn't *want* to come home, maybe because she'd decided her children were bad, or maybe it was just her first daughter who was bad, who was to blame, that mischievous girl, that daredevil of the bars, high-swinging, knee-scraping tomboy, that first daughter, that bad, bad girl. Maybe it was only me keeping her away. Over time I got good at filling in the huge space that was her absence with explanations, stories full of sad, sad endings, and occasionally, a scrap of a small story of hope: there was still that flying going on in my head, that leap into

freedom, that rush of air around my ears, all waiting ended, all weight suspended as I let go, turn and rotate, wing myself home to safety. There was, at least, that.

Of course Alice and Estelle, and many good family friends and neighbors were present during this time, doing what they could to help out, offer support, get us through, somehow. But no one's body was my mother's body, no one's.

The body, the platform, the head held up, eyes fixed forward, the trapeze, the chalked hands hooked around it, the shoulders held in their sockets, the slight leap up, toes pointed, legs held together, the downward drop, the start of the swing across, then knees up and over the bar, hands off, body penduluming back toward the platform and forth again, hands up, hook the bar, knees off, full body dangling for one more swing, back and forth, then lifting the legs, now in a sitting position in flight, let go, still holding the position, and drop, down, down, land in the net, bounce up, land again, seeing the sky through the high silver guy wires. *

So much about flying is physical: that solid act involving the flesh, blood, and boney body. And yet it can only happen in or through a medium, that is, nonetheless, less, a space that is, frankly, nothing: that formless, simply everywhere and nowhere presence we call air. Air. Atmosphere maker, a mix of gases, a stir, a look, a tune, breath: its seeming none-ness, its whoosh, its silence, its epitome of openness, its push. For me there is a lovely tension between the concrete and the abstract in flying on a trapeze: its pure embodiment expressed through its silky but surely invisible ambiance, its biological proofs lined up with its metaphysics of physics. I feel this same kind of tension when I'm writing, certainly when I work on prose, but with even more intensity when I work on making poems. That sturdy horizontal trapeze that I grasp when I fly—that solid shape I hold on to, let go, then return to, take up again—is for me like a line of poetry, that unit of urgent composition that I, as a poet, must make strong enough, true enough, concise enough to carry meaning across space. It must be just the right balance of lilt and meter, image and story to survive a leap into the sky of the empty page. Who hasn't felt the risky rush of facing that white blankness, that possibility?

Long before I ever touched a real trapeze bar and swung with it away from a platform, I was writing poetry. While I can't say for sure, I think I started making poems when I was in high school, mostly as a way of trying to give shape to deep but confused feelings I had about loss in my life. These early poems were extremely condensed and very cryptic—like small, tight word parcels tied almost shut with strict rhyme and sparse imagery, and probably not meant to be opened by anyone. I can say for sure that it was around this time that my father fell in love again, and after over ten years of being the eligible widower in our community, he announced at one Sunday breakfast at home, rather offhandedly, that he and our new step-mother had eloped three weeks earlier. My siblings and I were happy for him, of course, but we felt left out for not being included in the wedding plans, and more significantly, I think we felt the loss of our own mother all over again, and with a new kind of finality. There would be for me no more imagining my mother's body in our house, no more thinking about her as she might have been so many years later, and certainly no more waiting for her to return. How could there be if there was now a new woman, a new mother of sorts, in the house, and someone bearing no resemblance to my own? Something about the fact that my mother's physical absence so early in my life had gone unexplained meant that I had been able to imagine into the emptiness she left behind, which for me would always be defined by her image, or at least what I wanted that image to be. I could create her in my mind, again and again, and of course, revise her as I saw fit: I literally shaped her, thus bringing her to life in my mind. This practice was emotionally comforting, I'm sure, but it also engaged me in the act of making and shaping, that leap of faith, that terribly scary but satisfying thing we do when we risk expression through the use of form.

In my reading about the history of the trapeze and its invention as a form of daring circus technique, I read, of course, about the history of the circus. I thought I knew something about the ancient Roman circuses, those events involving chariot races, wrestling, and probably hungry lions, and assumed that our modern circus is derived from these early spectacles. But according to Hovey Burgess, master teacher of circus, author of *Circus Techniques*, and circus

pedagogue, there is considerable confusion about where our notions of circus originate. Burgess argues that the modern circus does not descend directly from the Romans and that their circuses, "such as *Circus Maximus*, were architectural structures designed primarily for chariot races. Some confusion arises from the frequent translation of 'panem et circenses' as 'bread and circuses' when, in fact, it means 'bread and races' " (Burgess 66). He goes on to explain that the first modern circus, the New British Riding School or Amphitheatre Riding Ring, built in 1770 and designed to accommodate exhibitions of riding, clowning, vaulting, and other circus-type skills, was not called a circus either. But it did feature what has become the abiding symbol, the literal form of the circus: a ring. This form, Burgess asserts, and its exact diameter of forty-two feet, is the one element that has remained constant for circus performances: "This seems to be the diameter that creates the steadiest speed and the optimum balance between centrifugal and centripetal forces for a man attempting to maintain his balance on the back of a galloping horse" (66). Thus the limitations of the circus ring, mathematically determined and realized through a combination of human and animal skill and finesse, are like other forms that shape artful expression: the metrical patterning of a line of poetry, the ratio of feather and barb to hollow bone in the curve of a bird's wing, and the gravity and desire combined in the arc of a flyer's swing.

When I finally reached the platform at the top of the ladder, my trapeze instructor said, "Okay, you can step across." What I was stepping across was air, all twenty-four feet deep of it there between me and the ground. There was a net stretched some distance below, and there was the welcoming hand of my instructor, and with barely a pause, I took that step. Though smaller than seemed safe, the platform was remarkably sturdy, and I felt, well, at ease in this high, slightly windy, distinct space. While my instructor hooked another safety line to the carabiner dangling from my safety belt, I glanced out over the glittering Hudson River, noting a few boats chugging by, and closer in, along the asphalt path along the banks of the river, clusters of people gathered, looking up, looking, it seemed, at me. Where was I, exactly? Certainly in a place I'd never been before,

"Hep"

but why wasn't I more afraid? Why didn't this high, rigged place feel odd, new?

Before I had time to think about it, my instructor told me step forward on the platform and line up my toes with the edge. I did, and looked over and down where I saw the net, a wide, generous weave shifting just slightly in the wind. Then with a large, long-handled hook, my instructor caught the side rope of the trapeze and pulled it toward us on the platform. "Here's your bar," he said. I leaned forward and with my right hand grabbed hold of the trapeze. It felt hard, even with the lapped layers of tape running around and around it. "And when you're ready, you can lean out and take the bar in your other hand." Leaning, and noticing that, if it weren't for my instructor's steady hand holding my belt at the back, I would have left the platform, literally tumbling off, falling, much sooner than I was supposed to. Now I had my bar, my solid line of contact which would, in a matter of moments, carry me into flight. I think I remembered to breathe, but I can't be sure. I knew I needed to listen for the word *Hep*, which in trapeze parlance signals a change and means "Go!" And before I could even wonder when, I heard it: "Hep."

And I jumped. And I flew. And it was as if I had always flown, and known this free space as home.

Since that first time in New York City, I've flown on the flying trapeze at several other rigs in Boston and Vermont, and when I can during my visits with my stepdaughter, her husband, and their daughters, I return to the outdoor rig along the river. It's hard for me to believe sometimes that I didn't actually fly until I was forty-seven years old, since even the first time I did it, I felt completely comfortable, whole, completed somehow through the act of climbing, leaping, flying, and falling into the net. How could something I'd never done be that easy? I've understood, of course, that it wasn't really the first time. I'd been taking flight in my mind since what really was my first time, when I was five and watching my jeweled bird of a trapeze artist fly across the stage on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. From that day, I was practicing my own art of flying, both those endless flight patterns in my mind as well as my other mode of flying, which is writing. I've also understood that my initial attraction to the woman on the flying trapeze was no doubt

psychologically connected to the loss, just months prior, of my own mother in that violent car accident. It seems to me entirely possible that the black-haired, jeweled flyer, literally swinging into my mind's eye at almost the same moment in time when my own mother flew forever out of my view, was a form shaped by my own grief and love and need for repair. And I see now how in my life as an adult, themes of loss, risk, and willfulness in the face of emptiness (literally stepping off that platform into open air) intertwine with and emerge through my explorations of the flying trapeze.

Even that image of the robin I chose for myself when I needed both to escape the loss I sensed and to grasp the power of my own will to ascend and find freedom—that solitary flyer with the reddish plumage and one small suitcase packed for travel—seems inspired by my first woman on the flying trapeze. The scientific name for the robin, which is a kind of thrush known for its tuneful song, is from the Latin, *Turdus migratorius*, and means to be migratory, a wanderer. I have also read that during nest-building, the female robin may have mud streaked across her breast due to pressing it against the muddy lining as she forms the inner cup of the home she builds for her nestlings (Stokes 340). I like knowing that this migratory singer, this feathered spirit is also marked by the earth and her most meaningful inhabitants. It makes me proud to be a fellow flyer, a form, a being of the air.

Note

The epigraph is taken from "Song," a poem by Robert Pinsky written especially for inclusion in *A Convergence of Birds: Original Fiction and Poetry Inspired by the Work of Joseph Cornell* (2001) edited by Jonathan Safran Foer. Here is the poem in its entirety.

Song

Air an instrument of the tongue,
The tongue an instrument
Of the body. The body
An instrument of spirit,
The spirit a being of the air.

The bird a medium of song.
Song a microcosm, a containment
Like the fresh hotel room, ready
For each new visitor to inherit
A little world of time there.

In the Cornell box, among
Ephemera as its element,
The preserved bird—a study
In spontaneous elegy, the parrot
Art, mortal in its cornered sphere.

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