A Dance

“Men are prostrated by misfortune; women bend, but do not break, and matyr-like, live on”

* Anna Cora Mowatt

*Etendre*. A babbling of the surrounding voices purl like the river that ran beside the girl’s house, the ebb and flow of conversation streaming past her. She brushed auburn hair from her eyes as she sat nervously, looking at her fidgeting hands. There was too much around her to even begin to take in, for once the girl removed even a pebble, the dam would release an influx of water. Brimming with anticipation, the conservative restraint that typified the gentile was washed away by the thrill. Whether the frenzy stemmed from the prestige of the dancing, or the company, did not matter; the excitement pulsating in waves, rolling and merging, collecting each other’s power. The chatter is on the cusp of spilling over when a blanket of silence is cast across the jostling audience, creating a hushed murmuring throughout the velvet seating. Waiters stand at the end of every aisle, laden with sweet smelling pastries. Their gaunt faces looked earnestly across the crowd, eager to sell. On the stage far below them a horde of performers entered the stage, bodies full of grace cloaked in amber tulle, heads crowned with gold and faces streaked with jade. They crouch, compacting and creating ovular bodies. We could feel their glittering presence filling up the room, and they could feel ours, our applause reverberating off the oak walls of the concert hall.

Years earlier, Cierra and her sister collecting Christmas beetles with her friend, plucking them from the shallow indents in trees which provided them shelter. They set up tea parties for the beetles, placing them in their wooden doll houses, assigning them names and roles. Once, their mother had found them doing this, curious.

* That’s the mummy beetle, like you.
* How do you know it’s a girl beetle?

It had never occurred to them.

Once, they had forgotten the beetles in the dollhouse, coming back days later and discovering them on their backs.

* ‘Sleeping’, their mother had told them, not wanting them to feel the guilt that accompanied responsibility.

The dancers rise together, and the music swells. *Relever*. The humming of a violin fills the auditorium, a mellow tune swirling throughout the building. The girl inhales the sound, letting it wash through her. In a sudden spin, the performers have separated, an explosion of darkly painted limbs. An extension of arms revealed an inky black silk gossamer layer resembling wings. *Plier*. An arch of toes. The sweep of a hand. All in perfect synchronicity (*Like twins!* Middle aged women cooing and clucking at the children dressed in their best overalls). The music dissolves into a sharp, lively melody. The violinist is at its strongest; sure, and steady as it sways around the music. The girl closes her eyes to let the strings tug at her midriff, harnessing her to the performance. A lover in a garden. The billow of a gown, kissing her ankles as her back is caressed by the sun.

She blinks open her eyes, and they are immediately captured. Fractionally late, one of the dancers is highlighted in her vision. Once an exhibition of cohesion in full mastery, the illusion breaks. A step behind, the lone dancer continued, seemingly oblivious to her displacement. The grace seeped out of the performance as a panicked realisation passes through the dancer, her movements jolting. Once fluid, the arm overextends, the comely smile hardening into a grimace. A murmur ripples across the audience, a titter of awkward laughter waiting to be drawn from poised lips.

Hours spent practicing in front of a mirror no longer had effect. The heat of the lights, of the eyes… The dancer looks up, the overwhelming gaze forcing her elegant movements elephantine. The rest of the assembly continue, their bodies mechanical in their turning. Their bones fracturing in pointe shoes.

The whispers escalate, the glassy screeching of the violin splitting into shards, thrusting into the flesh of exposed arms, necks and legs.

*Elancer.* The girl rises from her seat. Flushed, she pulls her coat over her shoulders and takes the nearest exit.

Guilt still permeates these memories. Cierra has often wondered what would have happened if she would’ve stanched the commentary surrounding her. If she had rushed towards not away…

*Sleep*, her mother’s echoey voice from the hall, *just go back to sleep.*