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Dangerous Curves II: Surviving and Thriving

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Dangerous Curves II: Surviving and Thriving

Kelley Hunt & Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg
the 940 Dancers as choreographed by Candi Baker
Deborah Bettinger
Laura Ramberg, Marty Olsen, Diane Silver

“I Want to Tell Your How Beautiful You Are” (poem) – Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“You Gotta Be the Vessel” (song) – Kelley Hunt, written by Kelley Hunt & Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Diagnosis” (poem) – Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Be Scared and Do It Anyway” (song) – Kelley Hunt, written by Kelley Hunt

“Lilac” (poem) – Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Get up and Live” (song) – Kelley Hunt, written by Kelley Hunt and (fill in)

“The Women in This Family” (poem) – Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Sister to a Butterfly” (song) – Kelley Hunt, written by Kelley Hunt – Deb Bettinger

Instrumental – Kelley Hunt

“Playing the Cello” (poem) – Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Singing in St. Louis” (song) – Kelley Hunt, written by Kelley Hunt/ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg on cello

“Reading the Body” (poem) – Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg with Brigette (FILL IN), solo dancer

“Love Heals” (song) – Kelley Hunt, written by Kelley Hunt and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Your Life is Your Life” (poem) – Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“Stronger Wings” (song) – Kelley Hunt and dancers (FILL IN)

“Bridges” (poem) – Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

“The Road is Just a River” (song by Kelley Hunt and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg) and
“What Is This Life For?” (poem) – Kelley Hunt, Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, singers and dancers

I Want to Tell You How Beautiful You Are

I want to tell you how beautiful you are
with your flat chest soaring
into scar across your heart and lungs.
I want to tell you even this is beautiful,
and even the rounded flesh below, the silhouette
hollowed here, extended there, the shapes new
and sudden, the beauty you could never see
when they cut your body open to where
the breathing organs breathe, the beauty
you'll mourn from the other side of your life.

I want to tell you, believe this now,
stop doubting that because it's not
what you wanted, what you expected,
it's not beauty. It is

just like weather you didn't expect,
just like ground cut back to hold more
perennials and wider swatches of
the wildest grasses.

It may not be pretty but I want you
to finally believe, now on the far side of girlhood,
past growing and giving birth to three children,

and now while you can still open and hold him,
his hands praising your re-grown hair
and flat new chest
that you are, beyond belief
and inside it too,
beautiful.

Diagnosis

Not what you'd expect, not in this ordinary body:
the phone message on the machine that says,
"mammogram" and "irregular," the technician's voice
later who tells you there's something
to look at, make sure, check, just in case.

Then it's that moment alone in the bedroom,
the chair so large and forgiving, the panic
that suddenly seems extraterrestrial, the incessant
questions while the wait stretches its beginning
to meet you.

Until the second x-ray hangs on the lit box
singing out its small constellation of calcium, until the
surgeon's receptionist touches your shoulder kindly
and nods, until you lie on a still table
while a nurse looks, shrugs just a little,

until that call, and those words which come
by the time you already know them, you
already know the walls of your body falling away,
this dropping down to your seat, to your notebook
where you write it down because you're supposed to,
to your fingers looking so normal
as they hold the pen and paper, unfurling

this new script, this open page
of a body where, without moving an inch,
you've become a flesh-and-bones double
of who you always were – one who has cancer,
one who can't believe it, and both of you
standing up, shaking the hand of the doctor,
walking out into widest sky you've ever seen.

Lilac

The day after they cut my breasts off,
just home from the hospital, not even
napping or talking on the phone yet,
that day, I walked on my own two legs
down the dirt road over the slope
of loose rocks, cradling, as I walked,
the broken body, the large orange handled
clippers, the big wind holding me,
the man I loved behind me getting ready
to start his car to come get me,
that day beginning the healing
from all of it – unslashed
from the expectation of what knife or infusion
comes next

was the day I made my way to my mother-in-law's
old-fashioned dark purple lilac, and reached against
the tightness of gauze and paper tape, against
the odd sensation of parts removed and scars
just making themselves, against my sore arms reaching
toward their old strength

to gather and hold,
to cut and cut and cut
all I could fill my arms with,
all the dark purple alive with death and
birth, loss and blossom, and the white ones too.

My arms filling with the explosion of lilac,
my life filling with wind and weight of branches,
all of it against, upon, my open chest,
all of it ready to be carried
into the next life
that starts right now.

The Women in This Family

The women in this family don't rent to own
our breasts. Instead, we weigh the dangers
of long term lease against our lives,
not choosing to keep but only if and how
to rebuild the changed wetlands of our bodies,
the ghosts of what were once the innocent curves
still clinging to us when we look in mirrors.

Four women, five diagnoses
nine surgeries, six months of chemo,
three hysterectomies, three daughters and
the worry we need to give away, just like
the pieces of us taken from our magical sleep
with our consent. Our teams of doctors simply
another branch of the family.

We toss acronyms to each other effortlessly,
memorize side effects and the 800-number for flowers,
email poems, bookmark websites in the middle
of the night, catch stories for each other
of friends who were lucky and the ones who weren't.
We remind ourselves while driving kids
to school or husbands to doctor appointments
who is in surgery today, who is at this moment
coming awake again.

There are so many women in this family.
There are too many women in this family,
all of whom can dial the cell phones of close friends,
to explain how the life expectancy graphs
don't match the rises and falls in our own stomachs.
We sense that the fiercer hurricanes, mutant frogs,
and eroding prairies come from the same language
as the pink wisps of scars under our shirts.
We know what it is to surrender loveliness.

But take us to any wedding, party, Bar Mitzvah,
even a gallery opening, or school open house,
start the music, and you'll see that
the women in this family know how to swing
our considerable hips and raise our stiff arms to the sky.
The women in this family dance like there's no tomorrow.

Playing the Cello

The soul knows grief
so I play the cello,
hold the bow like a wand
that must dip into sound,
connect with the tender steel
of the string in just the right way,
my shoulder relaxing,
my forearm extending,

I hold this cello, its torso
the size of my torso,
its neck close to my neck,
its hips between my legs.
I hold it close and do something
I've never done before
each time I try.

Somewhere in the emptiness
it shapes and holds,
there is a song
made of wind and forest.
There is a body, my body,
fragile as music or time.
There is a long call low
as that darkness just at the edge
of dawn, bright as that almost
turquoise blue before the late night.

I balance the bow
and press the song
into the grief
that knows this music too.

Reading the Body

I am still a woman
even if my heart hurts –
my whole chest aches
with emptiness, my soul shakes
because this body was cut,
one part off another.

In the tree, a dark bird with a red chest,
small, trembling, looks side to side.
The cedar boughs shake,
the cottonwood leaves too
while the soft edge of the horizon
watercolors into rain to come.

Is this where I live?
The absence of sun.
My chest empty. Breasts
torn off, flown away.
I want them back.
They want me back.
A lover's tangle in water and blood.
A choice based on a bet
that this gives me a clearer shot
at long life.

So much to carry on this chest
where knives lived and needles,
where small birds nested,
where trees blossomed,
where silence sang
in the voice of water,
where lands landed – holding
what was there, spanning the open
space to read this
new Braille of the body.

Your Life is Your Life

Know this when you must lie
completely still on the steel table
while the glass plate presses down
on your chest. Your life
obviously your life. Dream it back
into your memory for when
the kool-aid-colored chemo
is pumped into the plastic port
in your clavicle. Tell yourself
this when the doctor comes in
to talk with you, carrying
a small box of tissues. Don't
forget then how your life is
your life, not when the phone rings
at the wrong time, or the biopsy needle
inserted in your left breast shoots
its click near your heart. Your life beats
loud and often. Your life
surges against itself
in at least some cells so tell it
your life is your life
when you sit, naked from
the waist up on the examining table.
Your life there talking with
the pharmacist or here on the couch
is your life. Pick it up
and hold it close
especially when the wait
is long and the news is bad.
Tell your life what it is.

Bridges

All that year of cancer and surgeries,
of my father's cancer and death as I held
his knee, of his chemo and mine,
long waits for injections or test results,
I dreamt of bridges – large suspension bridges
I had to scale with my hands or climb over
gingerly with trembling legs.
Slim wooden slats stories above certain
rocks, and always a slat or two
missing in the high wind. Crossing
expansive spaces made of water
or shifting ground, junkyards or rivers,
untold distances to master.

Sometimes there were ways to stop climbing –
a phone call or a plane ticket, another needle
in my forearm, the gleaming ceiling of the
waiting room while the magazine spread itself
across my lap, telling me of other destinations.
Or there was the occasional fall as I sat on the bed,
the fear storming through me like shards
of nightmare, the reaching out for help
from that sensation of going under.

I do not have words big enough for how far I traveled.
I do not have language intimate enough
for how I arrived here, to the world more itself
than it ever was before, tender as the last breath
of my father, fierce as the woman
waking up again on the other side.

What Is Your Life For?

What is this life for, your life?
A wavering of desire and gratitude,
a hot number yearning to be picked,
an old lily, open and dying? A story
opening wider each day as you take in
the horizon, let the horizon take you in.

The wind aches, the waters trill in ocean or river.
You hold your stomach in your sleep
and hope for a dream merciful enough
to carry you the whole night
and next day too, wondering
what song you're singing
yourself toward now. How to sing
with the fullness of all the grief
your body somehow churns into joy.

The weather you thought you knew
is all birth again. Sunflowers fill all space
in the field, following the daily passion
for light face to face. You wake up
and take your first step into
the new story your life is walking
down this old road of your good heart.