

*In March 2020, Joyce Dixon began her three-month writing residency at The Work Room and the Scottish Ballet, based in Glasgow's iconic Tramway building. Two weeks later the residency was postponed indefinitely as the UK introduced lockdown measures to control the spread of Covid-19. The following piece is Joyce's response to her brief activities as writer in residence at Tramway, and to the global pandemic just then beginning to take hold.*

The last time I board the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow there is a breathless quality to the morning. The sky is clear, the trees still bare, and through the window I catch snatches of distant hills brushed with white. Blue pools in green fields have a metallic sheen, held still by a fractured skin of ice. Fir trees and telephone poles cast long shadows in the morning light. Outside, yawns on faces on platforms. Inside, window-shaped beams of sunlight cut across the carriage, thick with warmth and dust.

At some point as the train slides towards the city centre – grey stone giving way to pebble-dash, giving way to tower blocks and red brick – my phone pings with the Oxford English Dictionary's word for the day: *train-scent*. Not the scent of a train, apparently, but fox-smell smeared on the ground to train hounds. I close my eyes: the scent of this train is faintly clinical, top notes of ethanol and cleaning fluid. By this time in mid-March the carriage is near-empty. The morning news is laden with doom, and the usual commuters are mostly staying away.

As one of the few still making it, the journey to Glasgow and back on trains and buses has become an increasingly urgent sequence of compulsive acts. Central is the slathering on of slick hand sanitiser, accompanied by sidelong looks at anyone coughing into our shared air. Banished from the face, my hands aim for an itch and dart away, wary. I hook handrails with elbows, grasp doorknobs with bits of sleeve, and delicately skirt the edges of other people. Spring 2020 has its own choreography for getting from A to B.

This bodily anxiety is a new thing that grows with the infection rate, and is amplified by the fact that I am pregnant with my first child. Sixteen weeks in and I am wide awake to my own physicality, on constant alert for inner twinges or strange aches and pains. I keep a log of my symptoms – the migraines, the nausea, the cramps and fatigue – and an inventory of hazards, remembering, mostly, to avoid hot baths, cured meats, haggis, brie. Never more closely monitored, my body has never felt more of an alien thing. Inside is an extra organ that wasn't there a few weeks ago, and a kiwi-sized human with a heartbeat, fingers and toes.

To distract from the weight of this, the threats from outside and the fragile thing within, I bury myself in the goings-on at Tramway, interviewing performance artists and staff members, sitting in on workshops and dance classes, enjoying the spectacle of other people's bodies and the way they move. I wait for arrangements to be made to sit in on the Scottish Ballet's company classes and rehearsals, lingering a lot in the foyer, peering through glass doors at piles of ballet shoes and slivers of motion, and in the café, scribbling semi-coherent notes to return to later on.

When I arrive at The Work Room that Friday, two weeks into my residency, the dance company Barrowland Ballet's morning class is going ahead, the sunlit space filled with bodies dressed in tracksuits and leggings. I sit it out in the corner, watching, and am glad I did – even the warm-up is

pure performance, too much to ask of my non-dancer's limbs. They crawl round on all fours to the slow croon of Anthony and the Johnsons' *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*, working life into stiff joints and tight muscles, elongating shoulder blades and arching backs, twisting rib-cages. Skin squeaks on the slick floor with the gradual change between positions and there is humming, groaning and rolling. *Be gentle on your tired, Friday morning bodies*, murmurs the instructor, Aya, *softly, softly, softly*.

As the music moves to something jazzier the group splits into pairs for an impromptu duet, connecting back to back, foot to side, hand to shoulder, or engulfing each other in a full-body embrace. The pace and energy undulate dizzily, with peaks of frantic movement and moments of motionlessness. By way of a crescendo the whole group melds together into a jumble of limbs, connected as directed by Aya and the music into a single heaving organism. Afterwards they sit cross-legged and still, only their diaphragms heaving slowly up and down to a soundtrack of humid jungle noises. I take in the morning's spectacle of touch and heavy breath and try to reconcile it with my own state of bodily paranoia.

After class the studio empties slowly until there are only three dancers, and me, staying on for the afternoon's rehearsal. As we wait I notice a suitcase lying open to my left – inside are crayons, a bag of sand, paper twine, bamboo canes and white feathers. Barrowland Ballet is adapting the Greek myth of Icarus – who flew too close to the sun, melting his wax wings – and these must be the bones of future props. Next door Scottish Ballet is beginning rehearsals for *Swan Lake*, which I am due to sit in on next week – my mind is on feathers and flight, on falling and not falling, the tension of live performance, the holding of breath.

That afternoon the Barrowland dancers are rehearsing the minotaur scene, and the focus is firmly terrestrial. Molly is the minotaur, her hair shorn close to her scalp, her body locked in a muscular stance, fists clenched, head and neck rigid. Shape-shifting, she fights the natural fluidity of her body and the softness of her demeanor to slip into quadruped form. Her two co-performers circle and duck in orbit, responding to her bull-like bucking, dodging imagined horns. A few minutes pass and they take a pause. Molly looks at me and says – in her Isle of Skye accent, with its lovely almost-Scandinavian lilt – *I love that feeling, when the sweat rolls down, here, like this*, stroking a finger down the side of her face, and for some reason I am taken aback by this small, self-assured self-caress.

After swigs of water and slowed heartbeats the performers gather together with the playwright, Natasha, to debrief. *How is it being the Minotaur?* Natasha asks, as the scene is verbally re-hashed with lots of laughter and warm repartee. As they chat they tell stories with their bodies, limbs and digits articulating busily as they discuss the other dancers' mimicry of the minotaur's movements. *It's like we're trying to speak your language, somehow*, says one of the dancers, and Natasha adds *Like my aunt who used to put on her fur coat to milk the cow*.

There is another run-through, this time recorded on Natasha's phone to watch back through the eyes of the audience. Pinpointing a lingering softness in Molly's posture they invoke the heft of gym addicts as stimulus, and watch videos of bucking broncos and bull-leaping, all the while tweaking the choreography in response. There is constant rethinking, adapting and refining, adding a head-flick here, deleting a half-turn there. The sequence of movements is edited like a sentence, with its own

lexis – Natasha builds a dialect of movements unique to the scene: this is a *ripple*, this one a *flinchy thing*, another a *scoochy thing*.

I jot them down, these small instances of physical movements translated into words. When it comes to writing up, condensing my time at Tramway into a series of essays, this is on my list – the tropes and tricks to capture the kinetic in the verbal. I want to weigh up the casual nomenclature of The Work Room with Scottish Ballet’s impervious tumble of French terms. And I want to write about ballet shoes, the piles of them by the side of the barre, their short lives. And the work produced by Aniela Piasecka and Paloma Proudfoot, artists in residence at The Work Room. And the building itself, an architectural palimpsest of cultural excellence.

But right now, in the background something terrible and monumental feels like it might be taking place. Sickness is on minds and the tips of tongues. A babysitter might have been exposed. A friend is awaiting the results of a test. Everything feels fragile, teetering, especially at Tramway, where breath and touch are instinctive and essential elements to the creative processes at work. I leave The Work Room that evening, two weeks into a three-month residency, with pages and pages of notes, anticipating weeks of rehearsals, performances, interviews, touring the country with the Scottish Ballet. I don’t come back.