

Beginning of a Ballet Barre

She is sitting when we arrive, surrounded by skirt-adjusting, hip-stretching bodies. The air in the room is swampy-wet with moisture that, during an earlier class, flew as tiny, imperceptible droplets from the brows of spinning dancers to hang suspended in the space. The pianist sits ready, fingers curved above a narrow strait of white and black waves, prepared to instigate an erratic ripple once the cue is given. As the teacher enters, some scramble to their feet while others continue to warm-up, now more persistently. But she still sits.

I cannot help but notice her foot, as, with her leg extended in my direction, I have a perfect, unobstructed view of her ballet shoe's sole. It is clean. The shoe is new, and I am thankful that she is sitting so as to prolong its contact with the dirt-gray dance floor. I am so focused on the sole—the predictable pattern of the stitching, the gathers of canvas at its toe—that I am startled when it begins to move. Having rested sufficiently on its side in a quiet and delicate slumber, the foot grumpily rolls over in order to support the weight of the leg, the torso, the head. She is standing. The teacher demonstrates a combination and soon after the pianist plays. An orchestrated, well-rehearsed series of events, the very beginning of this ballet barre assembles itself neatly like an early morning reveille, but with one exception. Through the pink shoe that so trimly wraps her foot, I see a toe twitch, perhaps because it is anxious to move, or perhaps because it is not yet ready to be awake.

The dancers begin to bend and straighten their knees in a soothing unison, descending gradually but ascending sharply, as if the motion is intended to pump air into their stomachs. I see their hands touching the barre, each with a light grasp formed from four fingers that circle atop it and a lonely, separate thumb. I see their working arms, drawing soft circles around their

vertical forms in contrast to the angular movement of their legs. I see all this, and yet I am distracted by the foot. Her foot. It is beautifully constructed. Moving only to transition between positions, it remains stationary for much of the combination, providing me with ample time to fully analyze it. From the ankle, the top of the foot slopes down gently toward the toes in a cascade of pink snow. Rooted firmly to the ground, the foot seems to be aware of its importance as a support base for the entire body. Blood pulses through its vessels, making them stand out tensely. These vessels dip in and out of minute fleshy valleys; interspersed are mounds of protruding bone. The most striking feature of the foot's architecture, however, is the upward arch of the sole just forward of the heel. This well-crafted curve seems to be the sole's attempt to escape from the floor, to breathe, to return to the rest it was enjoying only moments earlier. Just as an opening parachute or hot-air balloon, I see the arch begin to float and, suddenly so airy and light, it carries the heel upwards. The sole, now almost fully exposed, must taste its freedom. Then the music stops, and the heel lowers. Melting into the floor, the foot relaxes with a little sigh of relief, or perhaps of defeat.

The respite is a short one, however, and soon enough the dancers are standing once again in turned-out positions, their feet loyally at attention. Again, I see the barre grip of the dancers, now much tighter and more desperate. I see also the free movement of their arms, so coordinated with the action of the feet that they seem to be controlled from above by puppet strings. Still, despite the multitude of moving bodies, and moving body parts, in the class, I am drawn to her foot. It is mesmerizing. With a hiccup to start, the foot shoots out from her body along the floor in a direct line; the movement is like that of a scissor blade tip opening away from its counterpart. As the foot transitions between pointed and neutral positions, the creases in the ballet shoe rhythmically wrinkle and soften. It appears that the movement dictates the

music. Molded by the pressing force of the sole's tiny arch, the clay of the foot is sculpted into a hook at each full extension to create a line that is subsequently elegant, yet strong. I am reassured by the shape's reoccurrence, but cannot help but sense distress in the manner in which the foot returns to its starting position. At its full point, the foot's sole has finally broken away from the confines of the floor. Knowing it must return, however, it avoids suffocation by grabbing at the air with short, quick gasps, much like those a small child would take to fill up his cheeks. In other words, there is a small lift, a slight delay in the direct closing of the foot. As the music fades away, the foot again settles down, taking another break. She, too, stands still, her foot waiting patiently in the wings to emerge, to perform, to continue on with its perpetual dance. After all, that is what is being observed—a dance and, dare I say, a work of art.