New Fiction by Dwight Curtis: “The Thirty-Two Fouettes”

I wasn’t going to tie flies tonight because I’d been invited to the ballet. The performance was at the Wilma and it was a formal affair. I had gone through my drugs, auditioned them each in my imagination, and made my decision. The invitation came from my new friend Colleen, the Arts & Culture Reporter for the paper. Colleen had a boyfriend. He was significantly older and was a wine buyer, or a wine rep. Something with wine. He was at a soft opening, which was why Colleen had invited me. Also attending was the Arts reporter from the *Daily Chronicle* in Bozeman, who had been Colleen’s college roommate. All of this was in my texts; I’d avoided replying more than one or two words at a time. I still found myself playing hard-to-get with Colleen, and I begrudged her for the way I imagined she saw me. This was not a case of her wanting to be friends and me wanting to sleep with her. I believed that she saw me as a kind of backup or practice love interest. Our interactions were flirty, but safe. She roughhoused with me. I was more age-appropriate as a partner and I guessed that her relationship with the wine guy was stifling and that she used me to play-act how it would be to date someone in her demographic. There was no threat of our consummating this phantom relationship, because at the end of the day Colleen was old fashioned.

I folded up a Vicodin into a piece of tinfoil and put it in the coin pocket of my corduroys. In terms of dress, I had decided on Evening Noir: midnight blue everything with a black cashmere watch cap and my silver watch. The ballet was as close to a cultural event as we got around here, besides neo-

traditional bluegrass and fishing film festivals. I didn't know anything about it, except that Colleen's friend had traveled across the Divide to cover it, and there had been an unusual amount of traffic downtown this morning when I biked past.

According to the marquee above will-call, the performance was sold out. There were men in tuxedos, and a row of idling black Suburbans in the bus lane. I cruised the milling crowd and caught sight of the promotional poster. It featured a black-and-white portrait of a craggy-faced man staring grimly into the camera. Many of the assembled patrons were wearing dress scarves: silver-haired men and women looking formal and somber, no one smoking. There would be a long line at the bathroom during intermission.

I was meeting Colleen and her friend at the distillery. I wished I'd left time for myself to get a drink-before-the-drink somewhere sleazier, but I was going to be exactly on time. I paused against the brick wall before I reached the plate-glass façade and fished out the foil packet from my pocket. I bit the pill with my canine and it split into pieces. I dry swallowed and made a face and then stepped out.

Colleen and her friend were inside with drinks; both women were beautiful. Colleen is a freckled hippie with a face made up of flat broad angles, all upturned, like they were designed to catch sunlight. She can do motorcycle mama and she can do flower child. Tonight she was dressed like an art teacher, in corduroy overalls and a turtleneck, with a paintbrush ponytail.

"You know Jessica," Colleen said, though I didn't, and I reached across the table and held out my fist to a ghostlike figure in all black. She had her arms crossed across her chest and a long thin neck and a pop of red lipstick. With squinted eyes and pursed lips she reached out a slender wrist and gave me a fist bump that sounded like a Pop-Pop going off.

“Wassup,” she said.

I ordered and then waited for my cocktail. I already knew I’d drink it too fast. The problem with cocktails here is that they’re too delicious. It was better to order something hostile, like an aquavit martini, than one of the tasty tiki drinks with a hole in the bottom. My internal metronome was calibrated to beer. Then the drink came and it was delicious and I relaxed. My tablemates were nourishing to look at, and because I’d dressed elegantly and knew that I, too, was nourishing to look at, I felt comfortable drinking them in: everyone wanted to be looked at tonight and the pleasures were all reciprocal.

The girls filled me in on the context of the evening’s performance.

The ballerino, Jugo Lypynsky, was a Ukrainian national who’d trained under Ratmansky. Among many principal roles, he’d danced Siegfried in the Bolshoi’s *Swan Lake.* In his early thirties, as his body began to show the gravity of his age, his work took on an inverse levity: in a solo piece for the radical Un-Bolshoi, he danced both Odette and Odile in a marathon performance that crescendoed with a flawless, turbulent, breathtaking, and utterly masculine interpretation of the famous thirty-two *fouettés.* It was the company’s first and only staging of *Swan vs. Swan.* To hear Colleen and Jessica tell it, interrupting each other in their excitement, and obviously familiar with the same sources and opinions, Lypynsky was an artist of the highest order, a technician, classically trained but not a hidebound traditionalist, whose attachments to the Bolshoi and the old order more generally, strained already, were severed at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Lypynsky’s talent, his leftist upbringing, and above all his sense of humor and experimentation had already drawn him from the grand halls and theaters of the old school into the thin air of avant-garde dance, and now, as the sun set on his body but (in his words) rose on his soul, he stepped

forward into his *grand pas:* political action on behalf of the Ukrainian people.

It was then that he suffered the attack. Lypynsky was—

Colleen pursed her lips and glared at me.

"It's French for 'whipped'," Jessica said. "The past participle of *fouetter.* It's a one-footed spin."

"Thank you, Jessica," I said, smiling annoyingly at Colleen. Our second drinks arrived. Everyone readjusted themselves and waited for the server to walk away.

It was then that he suffered the attack. Lypynsky was back home in Odessa, an area thus far spared by the bombings, closing down the black-box theater where for the past three weeks he'd been hosting open-mics, 24-hour plays, poetry readings, one-acts, bake sales, AA meetings, food drives, and every other kind of gathering he or anyone else could think of to keep morale high and to bring high-net-worth civilians into contact with artists and organizers. At ten PM, after he ushered out the last of the laypersons, he put on a fresh pot of coffee, turned off the house lights (except for the traditional single bare bulb over the stage: he wrestled with the logic of this, and ultimately conceded to superstition), and retired to the basement office, where he waited for his second wave of visitors to trickle in.

For the past few weeks, these had been the members of what used to be a recreational club for building and piloting drones. They slipped in through the delivery entrance carrying milk crates and cardboard boxes filled with tools and padded cases containing their enormous drones. These were high-school students, engineers, tinkerers, grandfathers: a group of dorks, in sweatpants and Velcro shoes, with tiny toolkits and headsets with retractable antennae. They were retrofitting the drones to carry bombs. Their leader was an obese, straight-edge lesbian with a streak of pure white in

her hair. Lypynsky had requested only that they not bring the bombs themselves inside. At first, they'd giggled at him, these dorks, who had no access to bombs, but lately he'd sensed a new seriousness in the room, and he believed they'd made contact with someone in the military. He preferred not to know; his role was as a facilitator, as a host, as a fundraiser, and as a benevolent countryman.

During these sessions, Lypynsky leaned against the kitchenette counter drinking coffee and thinking about the dancers he knew in Russia. Once upon a time he'd believed that art had a moral value: a rightness conferred by the universe on that which was beautiful to look at. Then he spent time in ballet companies. He'd seen what these beautiful people did to each other. They were backstabbers, they were gluttons, they were wolves. Now he wondered if, when the circle met back up, it wasn't beauty and cruelty that touched at the ends.

The members of the drone pilot's club were not the beautiful people of the world. But night after night they sat around this table chatting quietly about each other's lives as they built incredible machines. It seemed inevitable to Lypynsky that, before long, one of these pilots would be directly responsible for the killing of Russian soldiers. In all likelihood, it would be the boy Petr, whose robot was the best of all: a bulky and sinister machine with a trapdoor on its belly that could drop a bowling ball onto the floor with the push of a button on Petr's enormous remote control. Petr was in high school. He had a brother with Down's Syndrome, a condition that made Lypynsky emotional. He couldn't pass one of these people in the supermarket or on the street without his chest tightening. He was the same way with the blind. If it was an obese person who was blind, or, God forbid, a person with Down's Syndrome, it affected him extremely. Or, a person with Down's Syndrome who had very thick glasses, or a person with glasses who had a lisp. He wasn't proud of this. He was afraid it was a kind of fetishization; he believed it probably

had to do with his own beauty and physical robustness. Nevertheless, he felt it, and when he saw the reporting of his countrymen under attack in the Donbas and elsewhere in the east, and when the victims were, for example, a person with Down's Syndrome, this was when he felt the pathos of the war most acutely, which was to say, this was when he became the most fiercely defensive of his country, and when he became thirstiest for revenge.

Petr was among the downtrodden. He wore dirty track pants too short at the ankle and slippers that he clearly borrowed from his mother. He had government-issue glasses and he flipped his hair off his forehead like a girl. He had a bird chest and soft shoulders and he bounced on the balls of his feet when he walked. When he got excited, he shook his hands like he was trying to dry them off. But he had good teeth and a strong jaw, and Lypynsky would glance over to see the boy leaning into his huge robot, his arms buried in its guts, with a screwdriver and pen light clamped in his mouth, and Lypynsky would swell with pride. Lydia, and Masha, and Grandpa, and Petr, who would someday kill (someday soon), and the silent black dog with no tail and ears like a fox, and Mama Inna, who ordered a pizza to the basement (Lypynsky could have killed her), a pizza for them all to share: these were soldiers. These were heroes. Even Lypynsky himself, a soldier, leaving that bulb on upstairs and sneaking down into the basement on sore feet to put on coffee, and who in his extreme boredom found his muscles twitching into just the suggestion of *plié,* then *relevé,* and his arms going through the old progressions, now closing his eyes and feeling his body fill and lift, the muscles firing, though he was only barely moving, more thinking than doing, though the thought of each movement flowed into the next just as the movements would, and his breath matched the thought of each movement as it would the movements themselves, dip, turn, breathe, lift: the old steps, the classical steps. And then a gasp from the audience as he spun, his buttocks never leaving the counter of the

kitchenette, but each muscle of his body responding, preparing on six-seven, his right leg *à la seconde,* lift to *releve,* close to *passé,* his body whirling in place—*passé, passé, passé*—and he opened his eyes to see everyone in the room staring at him, though he hadn't moved, hadn't made a sound.

It was after one in the morning when he locked up, taking out the folded pizza box under one arm. The alley was empty. It was a bright night and the horizon shimmered with what he'd come to think of as the glow of war.

To have the alleys of Odessa to himself on these shimmering nights was the small gift of this conflict.

He opened the lid of the dumpster and quietly shoved the pizza box inside. They were still collecting the garbage, still washing the streets, and still the stoplights changed from yellow to red, and red to green, and the cranes stood over the shipping lanes like huge birds drinking from the sea. The *Sailor's Wife,* his favorite: walking once with Felix and Felix's son, only a year old, and the child had leaned out of his father's arms to suckle from the statue's breast. Lypynsky grinned at the memory.

There was someone behind him. A heavy step: Mama Inna, having forgotten her keys again, perhaps. Lypynsky turned.

"Good evening," Lypynsky said.

The stranger continued toward him: a man in a ski coat, the kind the slalomers wore, with the collar zipped up to his nose, his hands in his pockets, and the little spider logo glinting back the glow of war.

"Good evening," Lypynsky said again.

The man pulled a bottle from his pocket. The aura between them blinked from red to green, and Lypynsky saw that the man was wearing medical gloves. A drunk, discharged from the

hospital. Or, a doctor, and therefore a patriot. Lypynsky's thoughts accordioned together. He stepped backward to let this man pass.

"Eat shit, swan," the man said. He flung the contents of the bottle into Lypynsky's face.

"Three months in the hospital," Jessica said, making full-on eye contact with me. She licked her lips, and glanced sideways at Colleen. She lowered her voice.

"Sulfuric acid."

"Full body burns," Colleen said.

"Liquid fire," Jessica said. She took a sip of her drink and puckered her lips as though the drink itself were acid.

"He nearly died," Colleen said. "It went through his clothes, all over his face and neck, his hair, everything."

"It pooled in his underwear," Jessica whispered. "You know what that does?"

"Fuck," I said.

"Like Play-Doh," Colleen said.

"His eyes melted," Jessica said. "Like egg yolks. He swallowed some of it."

"You're a sicko," I said to her. She wiggled her eyebrows at me. I had forgotten Colleen. Colleen who? I was now in the thrall of Jessica.

"So, but, wait," I said. "This is who we're seeing?"

"Yes," Colleen said. "He hasn't been seen since the accident."

"He's been in the hospital the whole time," Jessica said.

“They had to reconstruct his face.”

“And his dick,” Colleen said.

“But, so, it’s like a talk?” I said. “On Ukraine?”

“It’s a performance,” Jessica said. “Lypynsky dancing, full orchestra.”

“Why here?” I said.

“Dunno,” Colleen said. “Apparently there are a bunch of world leaders in town, so it kind of makes sense.”

“Why are there world leaders here?” I said.

“To see Lypynsky, probably,” Jessica said. “And they’re going fishing. Shouldn’t you know that?”

I blushed. I did know. There was a group of VIPs who’d been on the river all week and I wasn’t one of the chosen guides. From what I heard they were having a blast and catching lots of fish.

“All proceeds go to the war effort,” Colleen said. “We don’t know what the ballet is. They won’t say.”

“But—” Jessica said. She looked to Colleen, who gave her a smile and a small nod. “We heard a rumor.”

“We heard…” Colleen said. They both leaned in, their smiles witchlike over the tea candle at the center of our table.

“He’s reprising the *fouettés*!” they said in unison.

They waited for my reaction, staring at me, barely containing their glee. Each was beguiling; together, they were an enchantment, like twins from a fairy tale. It wouldn’t have surprised me if, under the table, they were holding hands. The Vicodin was working. I was protected from their power; or, I should say, I shared in their power. In my smart

midnight outfit, in the bloom of my late-season tan, with my rowing muscles and two cocktails and the undivided attention of these extraordinary companions, these ballet experts. I felt commensurate, I felt up to the implicit challenge. I felt ready for an evening at the theater.

The fabrics of our outfits interacted with the fabrics of the outfits of the people already seated in our narrow row as we made our way to our seats. It produced diverse sensations: camelhair on corduroy (sticky), camelhair on cashmere (very sticky), camelhair on puffer coat (frictionless, loud), camelhair on dark wool stockings (so sticky, and so pleasurable, I almost forgot to say sorry: I just grinned like a jack-o-lantern as I peeled myself off the poor seated woman). We were in the middle, fourth row, very posh for the press. It was the same theater where I'd attended fishing fundraisers, but transformed: velvet seats, a huge velvet curtain, and a scaffolding of lights the size of five-gallon buckets. I checked my pockets, smoothed my pants, adjusted my socks, hitched up my belt, folded my coat, and was careful not to spill my drink as I settled into my seat. I was outside right, leg to leg with Jessica, and I looked at her and acknowledged this leg contact, which was unavoidable and intimate, and she reached down and put three fingers on my leg, briefly, wonderfully, and I quit fussing with my pockets and just sat for a moment soaking in the creature comforts of my velvet seat at the theater.

The people in front of us kept turning around to watch something going on upstairs on the balcony. I turned to see. Instead of ushers, there were several large men in suits directing a procession of old people, some in suits, some in stylish and colorful button-up coats or robes, and one guy in military fatigues.

"What's going on?" I asked the woman in front of me. She was in her 50s, short hair, turquoise brooch, Prue Leith glasses.

“It’s the delegates,” she said, looking past me.

“The what now?” I said.

“The UN,” she said.

I pivoted and watched a tall man with a short white afro and a carved cane take his seat. Next to him, already seated, was my friend Dane. Dane was wearing a collared fishing shirt and sunglasses on croakies around his neck. He must have guided today. I tried waving to him. He and the old man locked hands and came together in a brotherly embrace. Then Dane lifted his feet and pantomimed like he was falling out of a boat and the two of them cracked up.

“Dane!” I hissed for a second time. Probably he couldn’t hear me.

The crowd was excited. Everyone was talking to his or her neighbor, old people were using their outside voices, and there was the swish and crinkle of fall clothing, and the tuning of string instruments from the pit in front of us (it wasn’t a real pit, just an orchestra assembled in folding chairs before the stage), and the whole room surged with activity, except for us: we were silent and still, brimming over with our own private excitement. Then the lights flickered once, and twice, and it was like water hitting a hot pan. A player drew his or her bow across his or her instrument. The velvet curtain shuddered, as though the curtain operator was testing the controls. For once, I did not have to pee. Colleen reached into Jessica’s lap and squeezed her hand, and Jessica leaned her shoulder into mine, and I pressed my leg into hers, and she squeezed Colleen’s leg. The string player bowed another note, this one long and clear, and ended with a flourish. The lights went down.

They came up on the red curtain; the curtain opened on a plain black stage. Someone cleared his throat. Two rows in front of us, a hearing aid blinked, illuminating a woman’s pearl

teardrop earring. The silhouette of the orchestra shifted and resolved against the black stage as the players readied their instruments.

There was a murmur in the room as something appeared stage right: the knees and feet of a person in a wheelchair, pushed by an invisible assistant. The chair came to a stop and with great effort, haltingly, the figure lifted himself to his feet. He took a single jerky step forward onto the stage and the wheelchair receded from view. It was Lypynsky: it couldn't have been anyone else, though he no longer looked like the man in the poster. His face was gone. There was a general din in the room as people whispered and other people shushed them. I would have been surprised if Lypynsky knew or cared: he had no ears. He wore a skull cap over his waxy, featureless egg head. The hat was the same off-white cotton as the rest of his outfit. He moved across the stage with short staccato steps, favoring his left leg, his ballet shoes scraping the wood as he moved, and when he reached center-stage he turned to face the room. The skin of his face was a shiny mottled camouflage of skintones but missing key features: no eyebrows, one eye completely gone, covered by what must have been a graft, the other eye hooded and searching. His nose was two snakelike slits. Where his upper lip should have been were beautiful tall white teeth that shone under the stage lights. The scarring continued invisibly into his shirt and down his billowing pants. One of his hands looked fine, with a halo of light catching the dark hair on his wrist; the other was shiny and clenched.

The first violin struck a plaintive note and the room went silent as though we'd been struck with a magic hammer. I certainly felt that way: my limbs were floating and I kept glancing down to make sure my arms were still on the armrests. I counted to five so I wouldn't keep inhaling forever. The orchestra began to play, and Lypynsky stood unmoving, or close to it, though when the music began he went

from standing still to standing still with purpose. His bearing shifted. He was in a dancer's pose: feet shoulder-width apart, arms at his side, neck taut, his one eye scanning the audience, finding the balcony, and then coming to rest on the stage in front of him. His shoulders were hunched and his good arm hung lower than the disfigured one. The strings filled in. We were very close to the orchestra, and I could feel the vibrations from the bigger instruments. The music rose, and shadows on Lypynsky's shirt shifted as he took short shaking labored breaths. And then the shaking halted and he became perfectly still. The orchestra paused, leaving one high violin alone. It trilled and fluttered, searching for a way down, and, finally, fell, and as the other strings swelled to catch it, Lypynsky extended one foot, and began to dance.

He moved slowly and carefully, progressing through what I assumed to be the basic positions of ballet. He made his feet into an equals sign, with his arms at his hips. He lifted his arms slightly and separated his feet. He brought his right foot forward and made a hoop with his arm. He lifted his arm and extended his foot, which through his ballet shoe looked like a cameltoe. He began to raise his other arm, and faltered, blinking hard: he couldn't lift the damaged arm fully over his head. The music slowed, as though waiting for Lypynsky to recover, and he did, bringing his extended foot back into alignment with his first. He exhaled and returned to a neutral stance. The music looped, and Lypynsky moved through his positions again, more surely this time, still unable to get his arm all the way up in Fifth (Jessica whispered the positions now as he advanced through them), and when he finished the progression a third time, he began to move across the floor. He still looked down at the stage, and as he moved, haltingly, apparently without much strength in his left leg, he seemed to be rehearsing steps in his mind: he stepped across the floor gesturing with his arms and legs, moving his head and neck with the music, though not quite dancing, moving his good fingers as though conducting a ballet

in his mind. He drew into a clumsy pirouette, pivoting on both feet, dipping no more than an inch, moving his jaw with the music, and returned to his mark at center stage. The music restarted, and he resumed the same sequence, more committed now, though he still paused and faltered before the pirouette.

“He’s rehearsing,” Jessica whispered.

“It’s the White Swan,” Colleen whispered.

Jessica nodded, her eyes never leaving Lypynsky, who was advancing through the steps more fluidly, his fingers suggesting grand movements as he worked in a half-circle around the stage.

“It’s Odette,” she said. “B-minor.”

Now the music stopped almost completely, except for one oboe, who sounded lost in a dark wood, and continued searchingly as Lypynsky returned to his position at the center of the stage, and, finally, lifted his gaze toward the audience.

“He’s a performing a rehearsal for Swan Lake,” Jessica whispered urgently into my ear. Her breath was hot and smelled like red wine. She could have been reciting the alphabet, or serving me court papers. I nodded in total agreement. Jessica turned and whispered the same thing to Colleen.

This pause was longer than the others, the oboe still searching, and then the rest of the orchestra began to play. It was the same theme, but fuller than before. Lypynsky began his circuit, this time not only gesturing with his good fingers but lifting his arms (the right still higher than the left), and, in a moment that elicited a gasp from the audience, lifting up onto the toes of his right foot. The right stayed stubbornly down, and something like pain crossed his waxy face. He lowered to the ground and completed the

circuit and, as though he were in a hurry, began again, and the orchestra quickened to keep up. He reached his mark stage right, lifted his arms, extended his chest, and rose first onto the toes of his right foot and then, with a sound like a seam ripping, onto the toes of his left.

Colleen made a squeaking noise in her throat, and someone behind me said, “Oh, god.”

Lypynsky remained *en pointe,* arms hooped asymmetrically over his head, and then slowly lowered himself back to the stage. When his heels touched, he seemed to lose all strength: his arms dropped and he collapsed forward onto his hands and knees.

The orchestra abruptly stopped playing, and the room filled with voices. Someone in the first row tried to stand and was pulled back down by his sleeve. The curtain to the left of the stage rippled. Through the back of Lypynsky’s shirt, drawn tight, I could see his dancer’s muscles. There was a scratching sound that seemed to come from everywhere, and then I saw the fingernails of his good hand, scraping the wooden stage as his hand clenched and unclenched.

“He’s mic’d up,” Jessica whispered. “His body’s mic’d up.”

Lypynsky drew himself up, first kneeling, then to his feet. He held out a finger to the orchestra and gestured for music. The oboe was the first to play, slowly at first, and he was joined by the strings, and now, with music again, Lypynsky resumed his circuit across the stage. A dark stain bloomed just above the cuff on the left leg of his pants: blood, and something colorless around it.

Whether it was the adrenaline from his injury, or the new range of motion from whatever had torn, or just the choreography, he now broke from the circuit he’d been following and crossed the stage with long, sweeping steps. He rose to point and began teetering on his toes back toward the

front of the stage.

"Bourrée couru," Jessica whispered. "He's flying."

Indeed, as he flew, he lifted his arms and began to move them like wings, down at the elbow, the fingers of his good hand pointed, and the effect was like when you jiggled a pencil and it seemed to bend. He flew past the orchestra, and began to flap harder.

"Oh, don't do it," Colleen said.

He did a small jump, extending one leg behind him, landed hard on his heels, made a swimming motion with his arms, and there was another sharp tearing sound. He fell to his knees.

The orchestra stopped, the room stirred, and again Lypynsky got to his feet. There was blood and the other wetness now blooming on his shirt from his left shoulder, and the fabric on his pant leg clung to his ankle. He gestured to the orchestra, and they resumed playing. He moved to the back of the stage, rose up on point, and again began tittering on his toes toward us, his arms moving in a pantomime of wings, and now he jumped, landed, swam forward, and rose elegantly on one foot with his arms and leg pointing behind him, his chest and chin extended like the figurehead on the prow of a ship. From the audience came scattered applause.

And now he flapped harder, and jumped, and stumbled and fell.

His shirt clung to his body, dark with blood, and several people in the audience rose in the dark and made their way loudly toward the aisles. Lypynsky danced, and fell, and the orchestra kept irregular time, slowing as he struggled to get up, and quickening as he flew and spun, leapt, and fell. The spotlight stayed on him. He danced more freely now, without some of his skin to stop him, and his smart jumps and spins earned him scattered applause, and then the shushing and scolding of the applauders. How long had it been—ten

minutes? Not even. And already the crowd had split into factions. Even the orchestra seemed conflicted. Only the spotlight operator remained loyal to Lypynsky, never taking his beam off the dancer, who left a slick of blood and something else—the word that occurred to me was "plasma"— as he danced and stumbled across the stage. And now the beam operator held his light perfectly still at center stage as Lypynsky, his clothing dark and draped wetly on his body, stood breathing hard, his feet a perfect equals sign below him, and the left arm he'd been fighting with half-bowed above him. With great effort, he lifted the arm higher, and higher still, and two seats down from me Colleen closed her eyes. The oboe player, alone again, increased his volume as though trying to protect us, or himself. And still we heard it, a sound like an inkjet printer, and Lypynsky's mouth opened silently and his left arm lifted finally into a perfect oval above his head, fingers touching the outstretched fingers of his right.

"Fifth position *en hout,"* Jessica whispered.

From the orchestra came the sound of vomiting. There was a pulse of light and low voices behind us: the large men guiding delegates out through the balcony door.

Jessica gripped Colleen's knee. "It isn't Odette!" she whispered urgently. She hadn't taken her eyes from the stage. "Look… listen!"

Colleen didn't respond. Her chin was to her chest and her knee was jiggling. Jessica put her hand on my wrist. Her palm was sweaty.

"It's the black swan," she said. "He's dancing Odile! Listen… Look at his clothing… Oh, my god." She squeezed with her nails. "It's the *fouettés!*"

Lypynsky had returned to the front of the stage, breathing hard, his shirt hanging darkly from his chest like a wet

sail. The orchestra struck a jaunty melody, led by the symbols and the big strings, and Lypynsky waited, his arms bowed before him, one leg extended behind him. As he stood, something changed in the music: the sound curdled, dropping from major to minor, oozing down in tempo until the jaunty melody had become a dirge, sticky and dragging, percussive still with the symbols, but staticky, the way a storm might sound from a sewer. The lights dimmed around the lone spotlight. Lypynsky drew his rear leg forward, lifted his arms, bent slightly, and whipped his arms into a spin. He rotated on the toes of his left foot, extending his raised leg, and as he bent the leg into a triangle and drew in his arms he accelerated into a tight spin that took him off balance. He slipped in his own blood and fell hard to the floor.

The orchestra continued playing. Lypynsky lay still on the ground, only the toes of his *pointe* foot curling and uncurling in pain or some electrical misfire.

An audience member rose from his seat and, loudly saying "Excuse me" over and over, moved to the end of his row and marched down the aisle toward the stage.

"I'm a doctor," he said. "I'm a doctor."

He got to the steps at the front of the stage and paused, as though waiting for someone to stop him. Where were the ushers? The doctor took an audible breath (the whole stage was mic'd up) and stepped up the short staircase. When he got to the top, the curtain beside him rippled and the arm and head of a big man in a black shirt emerged and blocked the way.

"I'm a doctor," the doctor said, and his voice was projected throughout the room. He startled, and shrank from the stagehand or assistant, whoever he was, and the stagehand beckoned him close. Lypynsky was still on the ground, and the

orchestra was grinding out its heavy dirge. The stagehand whispered something in the man's ear, and together they withdrew into the curtain. It was the last we saw of the doctor.

Lypynsky recovered his strength. He slid himself over to a dry part of the stage and rose to his knees, then his feet. His face, smeared with blood, had the exaggerated contours of a Halloween mask. And he again drew up his arms, and bent at the knees, and whipped himself into a spin, extending his leg, now drawing it into a triangle, accelerating, and then extending his leg and arms again, spattering with fluid the orchestra and the several remaining audience members in the front row. The music plodded along as though it were coming from somewhere deep underground. Lypynsky slipped and fell.

The door at the back of the room was passed from hand to hand. Beside the doorway, a man in a tuxedo, his coat over his arm, chugged a glass of beer as his date pulled on his elbow. The door opened all the way to let out a wheelchair and I thought I saw the reflected lights of an ambulance. On stage, Lypynsky got slowly to his feet. Less than half of the audience remained in their seats. Colleen stood up and looked down for a moment at Jessica, then me, and turned and walked quickly down our empty row.

"That's twelve," Jessica whispered. She reached out and took my hand. Hers was hotter than mine. Lypynsky found a dry patch of stage and drew his arms into an oval.

"Thirteen," Jessica said. "Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen…"

A droplet of something hit me in the eye and I lifted my non-Jessica hand to wipe it off. There was a wet thud, and for a moment we were backlit as the house door opened, let out a body, and closed.

Jessica and I were having sex when Lypynsky died. We were in my easy chair; he was in an ambulance on his way to the ER.

We'd left in a hurry after the *fouettés,* when the curtain finally closed, passing with the rest of the thin crowd through propped-open double doors into the lobby where various uniformed medical personnel stood waiting around a stretcher. Thanks to the Vicodin, I had incredible stamina. Afterwards she got out her phone and googled Lypynsky.

"Confirmed," she said, her face ghostly in the light of the screen. She was sitting in my chair with one leg over the armrest, naked except for white ankle socks and her silver watch. There were red marks all over her pale body. I was lying on the carpet, covered in bits of feather and thread and brown chenille.

"Bummer," I said. We were in the front room, facing the street. My window shade was askew and I was convinced we'd been watched. With the new urban camping ordinance the bike path by my house had become a thoroughfare for tweakers and the homeless.

"Pronounced dead at 11:07 PM," she said. She checked her watch. "Injuries sustained during a ballet performance," she read off her phone. She squirmed in the chair and exhaled loudly. She scrolled with her thumb. "Dancer suffered…" she closed her eyes for a second, letting her knee fall to the side. I watched; I couldn't move. "…Severe injuries from an attack in 2022," she said, "when an assailant… Mm, fuck." She swirled her middle finger and closed her eyes. She exhaled through her nose and opened her eyes and had to lift her phone to her face to unlock it. "Yada, yada, yada," she said, scrolling fast. "Mumford & Sons show scheduled for Wednesday night has been postponed and the Wilma closed until further notice. This reporting is trash. I'm going to write the fuck out of it. Do you have any Adderall?"

"I have Ritalin," I said. I could feel my voice vibrating in the floorboards.

“Regular or time release?” she said.

“Time release.”

“Yeesh,” she said, checking her watch again. “Alright.”

I guess she stayed right there, working on her phone. I don’t know. She radiated professionalism. I took a shower and brushed my teeth and then brought her a glass of water and disappeared without saying anything weird. In the morning she was gone. I checked the Arts page of the *Daily Chronicle* but there was nothing posted yet, and anyway it was behind a paywall.