

Control Signal

by Mary Paterson

Consider this: you are seated in a dark room in front of a dark stage, gazing over the dark shapes of other people's heads and you are aware, ever so slightly, of a prickly irritation caused by the nasal hum of someone else's breathing just as you can feel, ever so slightly, your neighbours' neck muscles tense each time you scratch your pencil across a page in your notebook, and you begin to hear a noise that sounds like air being released from a tyre or pressure escaping from an industrial machine, and this noise is coming from the direction of the stage but you can't see exactly from where, so you lift your pencil from your notebook and crane your neck up and over the dark shapes of other people's heads and you hear the crackle of a raincoat behind you, which means that someone else is doing the same, and you look into the dark shadows of the stage until you see her: crouched at the front, a woman in a utilitarian pinafore that is reminiscent of a nurse's uniform or a manual worker's uniform or some other type of clothing that denotes a role more than it dresses an individual, and she is expelling her breath through her mouth which is held very wide and very open, just as you might hold your mouth if you were going to expel a loud breath onto a piece of silverware before rubbing it to a shine with a soft cloth, and in between each breath this utilitarian woman takes a brush and sweeps a dusty material onto the floor, a material which, you realise after twisting your neck some more, is sticking to the warm, moist residue of her rhythmic exhalations, and you realise that the noise you heard without knowing where it came from is the sound of this woman using the alchemy of her breath to coax a line of powder, incrementally, across the stage, which is to say, to make something appear from nothing.

Consider this: you are seated in a dark room in front of a mostly dark stage and you see a woman whose feet are planted in a pair of practical boots while the rest of her body shakes loosely and thoroughly above them: loosely and thoroughly but slowly at first and then faster and more vigorously until you can hear the sounds of her fingers slamming into one another as they vibrate at the ends of her hands, which vibrate at the ends of her wrists, which vibrate at the ends of her arms which vibrate at the ends of her shoulders, her collarbone, her neck, her head, as if she is a marionette puppet being handled carelessly from above or alternatively as if she is some kind of element being driven by a force that emanates from the centre of her body or, as you think later, when you have seen other things happen on this stage (like an elephant dance slowly and sadly in a black and white film and two train carriages roll endlessly on separate tracks and a political prisoner being executed in an American jail, even though none of these things appears in this mostly dark room, which is to say these things appear but they are not materially present) that she shakes like a body that is becoming something else, that as her face dissolves into a blur and her limbs begin to rattle, that this utilitarian woman is being transformed into a different person, vessel, character or machine which is to say, at this moment in time she is all these things simultaneously: the possibility of all the

lives she could lead, all the memories she could inhabit, all the people she is not and all the places she will ever be.

Consider this: you are seated in a mostly dark room and for the third time in a period that you would measure in minutes rather than hours, two women have turned dramatically towards you and other people like you and announced with grand clarity, as if they are rolling the words around in their mouths to discover exactly what they are made of, that they will Now Synchronise Their Hearts, and they trace a finger across each other's chests as if drawing out the movement of each other's organs with some kind of elemental force or transference that emanates from the centres of their bodies, and you almost feel your own heart pause for half a beat in order to be synchronised too and you know with the part of your mind that is irritated by the presence of your neighbours' untidy bodies that the hearts of these two women do not beat in unison following the tracing of their fingers, just as you know that they are not an elephant dancing slowly and sadly in a black and white film and they are not two train carriages rolling endlessly on separate tracks and they are not a woman who died when a plume of smoke left her body and in fact the appearance of all these things on stage is a kind of showmanship, a leap of faith taken voluntarily in the dark like the time the two women turn to us and toast us with their cups of water, the same water that has washed the hands of everyone here, or that has appeared to, which they lift to their mouths as if it is a rare and expensive substance that should only be enjoyed in company, and just as, when the two women trip the moment before the liquid reaches their lips, spilling the water at the feet of the people seated in the front row and thereby letting real water seep dangerously close to real bodies, and not just the appearance of all these things, just as in that moment you know that a picture of conviviality has been shattered, so you are sure, when you watch the hearts synchronise for the third time, that you and the people like you are all pretending, in other words that this is a pretence, the artifice of which we have individually and collectively chosen to ignore in favour of a leap into showmanship, unison and the appearance of something from nothing, which is to say: we are comforted by magic.

Consider this: not long ago you saw two hands waving, two palms carving through the air as if the air was heavy as smoke and dark as matter, as if the movement of the hands could whip the air into a kind of thickness, and at that time you thought about the shapes of the heads in front of you and the bodies you have left in the foyer and the person sitting behind you who is wearing a coat that crackles when she turns, and at that time you admired the smooth uniformity of the movement across two hands that belonged to two women born half a generation apart, smooth and sure like a slow and accomplished dance, and you could see from the concentration on the faces of the women whose hands were moving that the carving of their palms through the air clasped something grave and important to itself, but it is only now, a period of time later that you would measure in minutes, if you were counting, which you are not, even quietly to yourself in that muted part of your brain that searches for order in things like a body searches for another body in a busy street, it is only now that you have seen other things appear on this stage that you realise this smooth and sure movement that whips the air into a thickness is

also a spell that summons the traces of a plume of smoke that has risen from the head of a woman who was strapped to a chair in a room which may or may not have been dark, while a current was administered by hands and bodies that were not her own and passed through her skin, forced through her nerves, pushed through her synapses, until her limbs convulsed and her fingers slammed loudly into one another and something left: a plume of smoke, just like this one, or in fact exactly this one, which has been summoned here, in a movement which you admired at first for its beauty and accomplishment, and which you feel keenly now because it is elemental and real in a way that is not materially real but really present nonetheless, a reality whipped into the air with a simple and repeated movement until the room is thick with the memory of a stranger who tickles the hairs on the back of your neck, which is to say: our bodies do not keep us apart.

“To be lost,” says the woman in a utilitarian pinafore reminiscent of a uniform given to a prisoner or to a school girl or of the bland attire of a member of the chorus, “is to walk in small circles around yourself,” and it is in that moment, when the woman looks up from the line of powder being coaxed across the floor by her loud and invisible breath and turns her eyes to her companion on stage, a woman born half a generation apart who is dressed in the same, drab style which standardises the bodies of these two people in a manner that also draws attention to their expressive and particular faces, that you wonder just how long it is that you have been lost, and you realise just why your body felt so heavy as you watched the two women transform themselves, recently, into a pair of train carriages that roll endlessly on separate tracks, their eyes turned inwards until their faces became masks reminiscent of the gap between the version of yourself you present to the world and the version of yourself that you long to be understood, and you begin to wonder if you will ever be the kind of person who could vibrate until her fingers shook and whether, if you were that kind of person, you would be shaking out of fear, loneliness, persecution caused by a mistaken belief in the separation of bodies or comfort borne from the potential of change or in other words for something to arise from nothing and return to nothing again like the vibrations of a train carriage that career through the ground for hundreds of miles to rattle the seat of a man who is no longer alive.

Consider this: there was once an elephant that was made to perform, there was once a woman called Edith who died for something she may or may not have believed in, there was once a person who went looking in the city, there was once a dark room lined with the shapes of other people’s heads, there was once a body that convulsed when it was struck by lightning, electrical current or elemental force, there was once a pair of hearts that beat in unison, a pair of arms that waved in time, a pair of hands that were washed ceremoniously in front of a group of people just like you, as if they could have been your hands, as if they held the potential to slip into the fingers of all hands like so many pairs of human gloves, but for a moment you must try to forget almost all of these things because you cannot wrap your palm around the great sum of possibilities they entail and you cannot keep staring into the shadows or straining for the answer to a mysterious noise, or else you will never leave this dark room, and more importantly you will forget to

remember the expressive and particular details of anything in particular, for example the expressive and particular details of a skeleton of a chair that is levitating on a stage, that is lifted by the taut power of two ropes held by the bodies of two women who are walking in unison in opposite directions, so that the seatless chair twists and turns slowly above the stage like an animal trained to act against its nature in order to meet the expectations of another species unable, unwilling or uneducated to imagine the gulf of understanding between their kind and its kind, an acceptance which, if it had been gained, might coax the two parties towards the recognition of some thing or some things they might have in common, which is to say, might synchronise their hearts.