

On Marjorie

Nicholas Gamso



Though animate and inanimate bodies meet all the time in so-called “daily life”—and the intimate bodies I am thinking of, the chairs and ladders and TV sets with which I’ve often filled my dances, are surely daily-life objects—daily living rarely focuses on the many issue of mastery involved in these encounters and interactions.

It’s something about the very inanimateness of the object which seems to consume the performer’s total attention, something morbid about the mysterious, erotic bond that comes to exist between the dancer and the lifeless object she depends on to support her oddest, her most beautiful and daring maneuvers. Without it, she would fall—and no physical or verbal cry or gesture on her part, no appeal for further assistance she might make, could ever reach a partner who simply does not belong to the animate world . . . to carry on the act, she needs to know each facet and each corner of the object she is dealing with. She needs to know its hollows and its planes, the regions where it’s rough and those where it is smooth. Carefully, caressingly, she moves her hands along its surfaces. Coolly, clinically, she pries into each crevice with her fingers, with her eyes, her knees, her shoulders—every part of which she has command—testing it for signs of life.

—Marjorie Gamsso

[The Papers]

Please send me your last pair of shoes, worn out with dancing as you mentioned in your letter, so that I might have something to press against my heart.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe¹



Nicholas Gamso

This is an essay about my father's sister, Marjorie Gamso, a dancer and choreographer, a filmmaker, and a writer, a student of James Waring and Merce Cunningham and a disciple of John Cage, who died in December 2011 at the age of sixty-six. The final years of Marjorie's life were characterized by illness and poverty and the kind of obscurity that as an artist and intellectual she ascribed to her avant-gardism. Marjorie was contrarian by nature. She believed in *anomie*. Disorder, misrule, uncertainty, the abyss—she believed that these ideas were revolutionary and that, like anything else worth suffering for, they could be articulated rightly only by those artists who traversed the most remote fringes of consumer society, artists who would choose to reject shallow accolades and the kinds of day-to-day compromises that the rest of us accept complacently.

There is still a sense among Marjorie's friends that just being an artist, spending one's time in repose and reflection, might itself constitute a kind of general strike. For Marjorie, it was a strike not only against the powers that be, but against all the other forces in her life that seemed arbitrary and coercive: the rent, her mother, Pollyannas, Judaism, lousy singers and musicians, clean lines, selling out, the notion of deadlines, the notion of work. The strike consisted not only of her performances, and of the essays and manifestos she always seemed to be writing, but of tiny acts, covert occupations of the subway, fire escapes, parks. Nearly every day, Marjorie stole a copy of the *New York Times* from the Starbucks on Park Avenue at Union Square. She was listed in the New York City phone directory for more than twenty years as "M. Darkside." And at least once she rehearsed a dance on Charlotte Temple's fictitious grave in the yard at Trinity Church.

I care seriously for these details. I love them. But they are not solutions. And they are not revolutionary. I don't think we should design our politics, as Marjorie often suggested, on invisible gestures, or on the premises of *détournement*, on the secret clairvoyance of everyday objects, on patterns of light and sound and movement, or on the belief that we may as well seek recourse in signs, in misspellings and comma splices, or as the philosopher Michel de Certeau suggests, and as Marjorie took to heart, in turning our walking into a dance.

It is hard, in New York in 2012, to see these kinds of minor disruptions as anything but compromises. They mock the artists who live by them, even as they've become the official aesthetic of the City. In fact, I hold them accountable for Marjorie's death; her suffering—she often went without health care and without housing—was spurred by the belief that dance had the power to transform a city of ambition without purpose, a city that holds its poor people and its artists in contempt, a city that obliges endless work but that wears its diversity and irony, its *la vie de bohème*, with adolescent swagger.

And yet, if this were a society more accommodating to artists, Marjorie probably would have chosen not to be one. I am beginning to accept that Marjorie lived the way she wanted. I am angry that the yellowed promises of an everyday revolution served to hasten her death and take her away from me. But I can concede that they also allowed her to weather the world, to cope with its inequity and indifference, to tolerate it and find in it some wonder and mystery and joy; and I concede, too, that even if they could not overturn a society designed to oppress her, the things Marjorie believed and the ways she lived enabled her to save and enrich the lives of those she loved.

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Hearing of Marjorie's death, the New York Public Library offers to collect her papers in its Performing Arts archive at Lincoln Center. I'm glad they have a home, glad they'll be safe and that Marjorie, who would spend hours in the decadent Rose Reading Room of the 42nd Street library, has been afforded permanent space at an institution she relied on and respected. But I like to hold these documents, pull them apart, look at them as they *are*, the way they've been stored for years and not handed to me by a librarian in acid-free boxes; I don't want to think about the politics of the Archive when I think about Marjorie, to rehearse catastrophic ultimata—do we torch the library or the orphanage?—to be preoccupied. These are things that live best when they're in the hands of people who care about them and will look them over again and again.

I look at the papers I have, at e-mails about Marjorie's memorial and what is to be done with her things, and I see the names of her collaborators and friends: Leslie Satin, Bryan Hayes, Elena Alexander, Andrew Gurian, Sally Bowden, Karen Robbins, Tom Brazil, Kenneth King, and many others, dancers and artists and designers who worked with Marjorie throughout her entire career, and who are working still to reassemble for her, as a parting gift, a coherent narrative. They've been collecting her papers and reminiscing about her and have compiled full, annotated lists of her performances. They are the only people equipped to speak about the technical nature of her dances, which, they say, were always complicated, never obvious, often dangerous, and sometimes impossible. They are competitive in their devotion to Marjorie. But there are others who knew her differently, as collaborators and conspirators of her most quotidian life, her waking and sleeping, and who have those belongings of hers that she loved most and would drag from place to place.²

I visit Marjorie's companion Philip Beitchman at his East Flatbush apartment where he's set out three boxes of her belongings. He points me to a shelf where he's been storing some of her books. I sit on an ottoman and assemble piles of Marjorie's papers around me. I pore over them. There isn't a single page that hasn't been damaged, ripped in two, stuffed into a book, stained with nicotine or with coffee. I find some nice items. There are posters from her performances, raw, written in charcoal and mimeographed. There's a tiny tennis racket with a tag bearing Marjorie's name, a souvenir from her summer camp, where in one of her earliest performances she played Frank Butler in *Annie Get Your Gun*. I find an envelope containing flat human figures cut out of newspapers and taped together, wearing top coats and high boots and forming little urban agglomerations; and when I turn them over, their collective shapes frame some accidental text, and clues to their provenance are revealed: the *New York Times*, c. 1961.

I find a proposal for a seminar on chance and one half of a correspondence with a mental hospital in upstate New York. I find a postcard, sent to Marjorie, dated 1968. It reads,

*CURST BE THE DAY I MET YOU; I WISH YOU'D DIE, BUT I'LL,
PROBABLY, KILL MYSELF FIRST. DAMN YOU AND YOUR FAMILY
ETERNALLY!!!*

There are sections of several fragmented memoirs. One was written at the end of Marjorie's life and is part of a project never finished. Another was written in 1986, the year I was born and the year her father died; it is a series of shrewd and sometimes chilling reflections on her childhood: she writes about her pink, organdy party dress. It makes her feel "special, desirable": "I wonder," she says, "how hunters feel when they put on the skins of animals they have killed." There are lists of thousands of words, long chains of association written by Marjorie from the bed of her hospice as an exercise in mental acuity but suggesting what Marjorie always believed (with great fear) about herself, that she was mad:

*antagonism Samsom logghoria luggage House of Commons House of Lords Israel Hottentots
cartridge cathode ray assailant catharsis crushing lance Caruso cartouche Ouagadougou
searchlight mainstay nosegay memoir serum trench trenchant cure . . .*

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This is an essay about my father's sister, Marjorie Gamso, who knew how tidily we ignore those few people who dare to trouble the premises of our society and whose work, if it succeeds, articulates all those things that politics in its endless, iterative diktat forgets. This is an essay about her writings and her dance and the obliteration of those lines, if there ever were such lines, between art and the everyday, between the living and the dead, between a city's present and its past—between putting on a show and turning one's whole existence into a sprawling, disorderly thing at which to marvel, and doing so at all costs.

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[The Cacophony]

Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.

—Walter Benjamin³



Marjorie was born in New York City and raised on the Upper West Side. She attended Hunter College High School and, after a brief stay at Skidmore, returned to New York to study at Columbia University. At 18, she married. She was divorced within a year and moved to Los Angeles to flee what she called “mad love” with a “genuine mad man.” Her mother—who believed her daughter to be too precocious, too intellectual to be a dancer—told her friends that Marjorie was pursuing an advanced degree in anthropology; but in fact she was attending ballet classes with the aging Uruguayan ballerina and revolutionary Carmelita Maracci. In California, she learned how to fashion herself as a nomad and a Socratic teacher, and how to adopt her friends as students without their consent and at times without their knowledge. Marjorie hitchhiked to rehearsal and sat in diners until dawn. She returned to New York in 1970 and began to study postmodern dance with Waring and Cunningham. She held workshops in Cunningham’s Bethune Street studio, adopting his fragmented vocabulary, his sense of play and risk and tension and of the absurd. And she relished it. She founded her dance company, Marjorie Gamso and the Energy Crisis, in 1976.

Aside from that brief sojourn to LA, a year in Mexico City, and occasional stays in Paris, Marjorie spent her whole life in New York. The city’s chaos, its disorder, nudged at the feet of her dancers, became a kind of scaffolding for her work; her dances were set aloft by tensions and anxieties and by her belief in risk, her belief that the city’s shifting landscape would keep her work and, in turn, her day-to-day life from ossifying or being emptied of necessary meaning—what might with other idols be called “faith.” As the city’s rhythms slowed and jerked, as they lost their place and fell away from predictable syncopation, Marjorie’s dances would respond and supplement, fill the rhythm’s voids while reaching back knowingly, strategically to recover some beautiful and marvelous clip of sound or flash of light or gesture or rhythm or *look* from the recesses of their choreographer’s storied, surreal urban mind. Marjorie’s works became an archeology of her memory—but always of its edges, always of those areas where it wove into the city’s unexpected spaces and where it could, from those strange vantage points, look back.

Two such spaces:

1) Her hospice, where she wrote sections of a memoir about growing up in New York, about looking up from the baby carriage at living and moving beings; her hospice, where she held a rehearsal for a piece that would never be finished, and where, in order to do so, she had to reserve the “multipurpose room,” whose only purpose, I thought to myself when I visited her there, was to give comfort to the dying and to their families, and whose purpose, therefore, was one of the most important in the world; her hospice that by chance catered to orthodox Jews and whose elevators ran automatically from one floor to the next so that some dying rebbe would not be forced to commit that most quotidian of sins, pressing a button, on his last Sabbath on earth.

And 2) the baby carriage itself. Even as an infant, Marjorie saw the world’s seams, beautiful but unraveling:

New York in the 1940s: neon signage; cigarette smoke; soldiers in uniform; smartly-dressed women in tailored suits, carefully coiffed. They wore tinted stockings with prominent dark seams that showed off their legs to advantage. These stockings were fragile, unruly. The threads would unravel, oh how they would unravel.

The seams would not stay straight. Constant vigilance was required of the woman who chose to wear them. She dared not stumble. She was living in what a well-known poet called “The Age of Anxiety.”

It puzzled my mother that I seemed not to find the protective environment of the baby carriage entirely to my liking.

She could see so much from there, those modern, novel technologies designed to conceal a reality of limitless challenges and opportunities, but never fully doing so. Her charge was *unconcealment*, unraveling, seeing in the people she loved hidden and suppressed and forgotten qualities, ghosts.

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Marjorie had a great love for dispossessed men, some of them gay, most of them poor, many of them alone. This is perhaps what attracted her so deeply to the men from Black Mountain, whom she adopted as idols and as teachers. Her love of the city's detritus, her ability to breathe life into the inanimate and to imagine alternative lives for lamps, chairs, notes, textiles, ladders—all of it—puts me in mind of Johns and Rauschenberg, and of course of Cage. She would perform for years at the annual September 5 celebration of Cage's birthday (she died just shy of his one-hundredth). She would talk of interpenetration and unimpededness, adoring, as Cage called it, the "disorder that characterizes life," and looking with indignation at the "order and stabilized truth beauty and power that characterize a masterpiece."⁴ She tried to replicate with her body what Cage had done with sound—not, that is, the sounds themselves, but whatever guided or mediated their transmission. She would dance her *relations* to those sounds, and her dance would replicate, in its essential ephemerality, their unaccountable gaps and errors, skips and scratches. She would dance the *phenomenon* of static that accompanies any copy, any facsimile, those of light and nature and of a city endlessly reproducing itself.

I find in her papers notes from "A Proposal to Create a Seminar on the Subject of Chance," an essay about her life that ends abruptly, before she proposes anything. Marjorie remembers her first encounter with a stereo system, here, in New York, at the home of a friend whose parents were "more up-to-date" than her own, and who—for the purposes of a proud, aspirational demonstration of their cherished new objects—had recorded Mantovani's string orchestra. The father of the family fiddled with the machine's knobs and cords and played with the arrangement of its speakers. He asked Marjorie which effect she liked the most. It was at that moment that she realized, first, that her two ears had rendered her a stereophonic being and, second, that it was *static*, and the static of the city in particular, that really turned her on. Its resonance, "traffic noises, weather noises, and family noises," coursed into her body at an age, she adds, when she found her organs "perplexing." Static had fascinated her and she saw that it had also fascinated this man, the father of her friend, "the patriarch and the one, after all, whose hard-earned money had made [the stereo's] purchase possible." His face would manifest expressions of surprise, "painful grimaces," when his stereo produced static. "It was as if he felt the ghosts in the machinery threatened him," she writes, "or was it that he felt he was threatening them?"

The ghosts were everywhere: sirens that linger as they are volleyed between the city's brick high-rises, the noise—white noise—of speakers and amplifiers and microphones, light streaming into and out of open windows, “ghost images” in photographs and in the grain of early, primitive video. They were what made the world, and the city, inhabitable; they were not just for amusement, but for strength. They were the basis of an ethics: every sound and every glimmer of light, and surely every step, could be linked to a metaphysical other, some ghost who could be counted on to always “be on the scene, creating interference, affecting the moves.” They would be divined through systems of recording and replaying, of looping and over-dubbing, and dragging microphones across the floor. They could be resurrected through touch—probing and rubbing and the laying of one's hands—and through the rescue of objects.

Marjorie's friend and collaborator Bryan Hayes, who wrote a series of reflections on Marjorie's works, reports on her objects: In *Fugitive Furniture*, her dancers picked their way through a sea of smashed wooden chairs, which they'd found in rehearsal and which they'd thrown from the balcony onto the stage. In the *Infatuated Forest*, a cadre of dancers dressed in black whirled around three ladders, which Marjorie had dragged in herself, and onto which she had attached hundreds of stark white branches: “the effect,” Hayes says, “was ineffably elegant.” In a solo performed in Paris in 1984, a swath of black fabric suspended above her was gradually lowered to the stage, swallowing her up. And in *Hour of the Horizon*, in 1985, a tribute to her friend Bill Shephard, who danced in the piece as he was dying of AIDS, Marjorie cut and painted an enormous piece of cardboard to look like a sail boat, and carried it gracefully along the stage while Beethoven's String Quartet in A Minor faded into silence.

Marjorie planned to take these themes further—to fold them back on each other and on the whole sweep of modernity, its materiality—when she wrote and choreographed an eight-part video performance called *The Enlightenment*, in which eight different women would dance with eight different lamps, and would resurrect, in turn, eight different moments in the history of illumination: in her notes on the piece, her discourse on *The Enlightenment*, Marjorie imagined these women, “one being strangled by the serpentine embrace of a gooseneck lamp”; “one struggling to escape the glare of a bare bulb”; “one carrying a torch, lighting the way for the revolutionary people's armies of the Paris Commune”; “one from the 1930s dancing in the head lights of a stylish automobile about to run her down”; and

One confronting the future. i.e., the unknown, i.e., a monstrous lamp, one that doesn't make sense, that breathes fire and glows like neon, that smokes and smolders and spits and oozes and crackles.

The woman who would dance the role of the Enlightenment would wear a chandelier on her head; the dance would be precarious—it might be deadly—but she would be brighter than all the others and would be played, of course, by Marjorie herself. This piece was a meditation on the relationship of object and ghost, manifest in the movements of object and light and sound

and dancer, and would have become, had it ever been finished, a visual encyclopedia of artificial light, of human organization, of the City. Its conception began, Marjorie says, with her “desire to dance with a street lamp.” She specifies: not just any lamp, but one of those iconic lights that would dot the streets in the turn-of-the-century city, lamps that would shatter during upheavals and light the way for travelers, for women who would stop to stand in their glow, and women, especially, who would dance there. “Lamps,” Marjorie writes, “that did not rise so many stories above the ground, that burned with real fire, real fire that had to be reignited each night, carefully tended.”

The Enlightenment was never finished. Marjorie’s collaborator, the avant-garde composer Jerry Hunt, had been diagnosed with cancer and had killed himself, and the project was put on hold. What remains is her essay and some video, and presumably—though I haven’t found them—a few lamps. And their ghosts.

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Among Marjorie’s papers, I find some scraps stolen from an office where she worked as a typist about ten years ago. The company, The Wall Street Transcript, conducted interviews with leaders of what Phil still calls the capitalist class. Marjorie transcribed them. One catches my eye:

It has always been the company’s mandate . . . to develop the world’s largest networked audience.

And, miraculously, on the other side, Marjorie has written,

A city is under foreign occupation, and everyone feels the enemy’s presence. It transforms everyday activities into acts of courage and endurance. The state of occupation affects the urban landscape, the traffic flow, the pedestrian patterns that evolved over years, decades, centuries perhaps. The most familiar crossings seem alien.

I ask about the origins of this palimpsest; Phil guesses it might be notes from a 2004 performance in protest of the Republican convention, in which Marjorie danced before a film showing the electrocution of an elephant. “Do you know the word ‘détournement’?” Phil asks.

I think of the last time I saw Marjorie in public. She and my father had come to meet me at Occupy Wall Street. Marjorie’s condition was not improving, but the conditions of the day made her smile and laugh. There were thousands of people in Zuccotti Park, which was still, early in the Fall, electrified by optimism. Marjorie met some of my friends and aped for a photo with my father, the last ever taken of her. She loved seeing so many people, young people, who were proposing to live by alternative ethics and to do so in *her* city, to use her city as a stage for new and unexpected art, art suffered over by one vast horizontal body, unbound and unmediated,

that could churn up ghosts even as they rejected the tyranny of *parents*. Marjorie was delighted by this concept, and phoned my father that night to tell him so.

She must have known those essential things about New York City: that it is an unjust city but a seductive one, a seat of power—sure—but one whose diners and parks, bars, clubs, subway platforms, and cramped apartments have for years been excavated by artists and writers, and by reporters, and by deviants, by freaks, pariahs, the poor; that these spaces could be transformed into warrens of drugs and sex, into combustion chambers of those wonderful, deeply modern ethics—DIY, pay-what-you-can; but also that when the city does reveal its derelicts, it is most often to rehearse that famous, reproductive parataxis—old New York, new New York—and to confirm for nostalgists and tourists alike its essential weirdness. Is it indeed the case that old New York is gone? Are its successive regimes of policing, gentrification, over-development, privatization also regimes of banalization, regimes of boredom and arbitrary mimesis, regimes of the lame, the obvious, and the commodified?

How awful, I would say to Marjorie, that our mayors can thump their chests and announce that we—we New Yorkers—are deviants, that they can call (with knowing irony, that vilest of ironies) the NYPD an *army*, or to say, as Ray Kelly said, that the city had the capabilities to “take down an airliner.” How awful, but how clarifying too. Marjorie would tell me that these were the speaking parts of politicians, and remind me that people always found ways of getting by. The homeless are not invisible, she would tell me. They are warming up in a Starbucks, sleeping in ATM caves. They are at the movies. Marjorie was at times homeless herself, and she always knew about the kinds of things one could do for free. She became skilled at navigating the system to secure those few privileges afforded to artists and students and the elderly. Yet, she would be turned down so often in so many ways, would be the subject of derisive laughter and dismissive glances from all the usual suspects. Cops, academics, patrons of the arts—she felt exiled by these figures and by their bad faith. And nevertheless she endured.

I accept that Marjorie’s ethics could surprise me and leave me speechless, leave me in awe; I see now that the revolts she staged were especially seductive when set against what she knew to be an abominable society. Its victims were all around her. Some of them were living and some of them were dead, and many of them had died of neglect and exposure. That some died of AIDS, that some committed suicide, and that Marjorie would pay them tribute and give them comfort, and that she often did so in the silence they asked for, that she chose *not* to demand from them some kind of political outrage because their conditions were mocked by the city in its most official capacities—this makes me question whether I can judge a single thing Marjorie did, whether she represented the city’s true consciousness, whether—because of her stereophonic two ears, and her perception of ghosts and of ghost images, and her ability to see in an object traces of other worlds and other times—she was uniquely equipped to comfort New York’s still-living victims, and whether this might qualify her for some wonderful, eccentric New York sainthood. I accept that Marjorie needed New York, even if its costliness and inequity, its superficiality, its cruelty and everyday traumas may have shortened her life, deadened her by degrees. I am living

with this seeming contradiction. It begins to make more sense to me, and I begin to think that if there could be an essential New York it would be Marjorie's. And in accepting that, I begin to accept her politics.

I return to her 2004 "Proposal for a Seminar On Chance," her description of undergoing an MRI, of the warnings of technicians to ignore the "terrible noises" that would accompany the scan. Instead, she took solace in thinking of Cage. She "decided to listen closely to what turned out to be an unpredictable mix of hammering and scratching sounds." She "tracked every change in volume and tempo, and lost track of time." Remembering this procedure, she thinks again about ghosts, about her own ghost, and says,

What none of us can—or should—forget [...] is that ghosts, as anyone who has lived through a good part of the century before this one well knows, are not necessarily benign, far from it. We surely know that collaboration has its dark side and that chance . . . well, chance involves chance, the chance of personal failure and global catastrophe. Still, as survivors of some of that century's worst horrors tell us, sometimes chance is the only chance you have.

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Since Marjorie's death, Phil has been listening to her voice and watching video of her performances. He puts on a cassette tape he made early in their relationship. They talk about the holocaust and the detonation of the atomic bomb and debate which was better for poetry. Things begin to get philosophical. Phil is eager to talk. He teaches a few mornings a week, but on his days off he's been re-reading *Being and Time*. He decides that Heidegger was right about everything—well, almost everything. Here we are again, talking about the Holocaust, about catastrophe, occupation. I tell Phil what I know about Walter Benjamin and his papers, distributed to friends, stored in breadboxes and cabinets, hidden in the library before being sent from Paris to Moscow and finally to Frankfurt. What was lost? What does it mean to keep these kinds of papers when your time is running short, when you're in a city under siege, or when you're a political dissident? Quotations, scraps of paper, ephemera, snapshots—each is tethered to a point of knowledge on a vast human continuum, access to something beyond the immediate and contingent, a revolutionary ideal or an object of beauty or a single, last hope; but as a body, as a collection, the scraps relate the limits of earthly experience and the human imagination. They reveal that there can be no adequate index, no key, only the testimony of the collector. And the collector's days are numbered.

We talk more about Benjamin, find in him all those philosophers who smoke and starve and glean and collect and speculate, who foretell the future, philosophers who love modernity even as they are its most obvious and immediate victims and who are willing to parse the world even as it suffocates them, even as their lives are compressed by it. Benjamin wrote of Berlin, the Berlin of his childhood, which would by the time of his death become a Berlin symbolic of the

century's most gruesome but perhaps most predictable catastrophe; in the very heart of European civilization, death was mechanized, industrialized, sanctioned by the theatrical tendencies of what can only (balefully) be termed "democracy," oiled with the logics of the shop floor and modern medicine, and wrought at last in the primitive power of the Third Reich's golden iconography—eagles, colonnades, litters—while six million Jews were lead to their deaths and as the continent lay in ruin. He wrote of Paris, in whose vast arcades he felt wonder, awe, but which was under occupation and which even in its love of bohemia, of the artist, of letters and words, could not hold. He would give up his library and be dead within the year.

I tell Phil about the "pearl diver," Hannah Arendt's elegiac metaphor for Benjamin, which I'd read excerpted as an epigraph in a book I stole from Marjorie's library. I find it and read it to him. Arendt wrote that Benjamin's chief characteristic, a capacity for what she calls "poetic thinking," obliges acts of constant recuperation and rescue, the breathing of or discovery of or invention of life.

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what was once alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them into the world of the living.⁵

This passage puts me in another frame of mind. Its tranquility, its grace and ease, unsettle me. The mute blues of the oceanic dreamscape I imagine *pacify* the pearl diver as he carries under his arm some miraculous treasure and pulls at the water. I wonder if such peace is commensurable with a life of trauma and suffering or with the conditions that pushed Benjamin *into* death, or if it is an adequate metaphor for his life. And for Marjorie's life? I don't know. Graceful as she was, her sense of *chaos*, *struggle*, and *endurance* compelled her to deride the gauze that some artists use to soften these everyday experiences. The bent sounds and filtered light of water suggest a scene too mellifluous, I think, for Marjorie, who loved texture and static and hated the compulsion to "smooth over," to be endlessly "precise," or to be clean; to Marjorie, these were totalitarian inclinations, fascist inclinations that obscure simple truth of friction's surreptitious functions.

But in the end, like Benjamin, she went softly. The embodied haze of a death accompanied by morphine—causal in Benjamin's case, merely procedural in Marjorie's—strikes me as a final, merciful smoothing of edges, and Marjorie was willing to accept it. I try to imagine her death, and to imagine an impossible sensory overlay: paralysis and weightlessness, staying

and going. Going drugged and numbed, listening through the haze to her analog heartbeat as it's transmitted through the gears of the monitor that's been attached to her body—how can I imagine what it was like for Marjorie to go without going myself?

I have experienced morphine. Morphine creates the sensation I feel when I see the light of five or six a.m. cast on my ceiling, when I've been up reading or drinking or burying my nose in someone's nape, when I've taken in his secret, personal, intimate five a.m. scent and lay still against him and close my eyes. Morphine creates the sensation of lying with my red, wool Hudson's Bay blanket—inherited from my father, who inherited it from his—pulled over my head to soften the noises of morning in the city and to keep the new day at a merciful distance. Morphine creates the sensation of sitting in the darkness of a movie house while the credits roll and the people around me start to get up, but being so moved or frightened or angered by what I've seen that I have no other choice but to stay still while they go by.

I think of ghost images, seas of them, streaking out of the green grain of a betamax video, part of Marjorie's stately, haunting *Port of Asides*, 35 Dance Incidents to Beethoven's "33 Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli," from 1980. I think of those final moments of Marjorie's memorial, when red and orange and purple Winter light lingered in the arched windows of the Cunningham studio as we watched her ghost projected onto the screen before us: Her dancers crept on their hands and knees. They aligned their shoulders and formed the body of a reptile. And she lay on top of them, and writhed with pleasure, and the audience sat in silence and wept.

And then I think of my mother, who was alone in the house, asleep and abruptly awakened, when she'd heard news of Marjorie's death. The nurses called in the middle of the night. Phil had been with her, they said, and she had gone without pain. My father was on the road and couldn't be reached. Better, my mother thought, to wait till the morning. What was her state during these intervening hours, when she would have been sleeping but now, oppressed by that toxic knowledge, when she lay awake? Did she keep her eyes open? Did she turn on the television and let its blue light wash over her? Did she try calling me? Did she pray? When she did call, the next day, to say that Marjorie had died—died more suddenly than any of us would have imagined—I slunk into my bed and pulled at my covers and went to sleep for hours.

*

[The Family Secret]

The name given to her, the Divine, probably aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person descended from a heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light. She herself knew this: how many actresses have consented to let the crowd see the ominous maturing of their beauty. Not she, however; the essence was not to be degraded, her face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection, which was intellectual even more than formal. The Essence became gradually obscured, progressively veiled with dark glasses, broad hats and exiles: but it never deteriorated.

—Roland Barthes⁶

Nicholas Camiso



With a few exceptions, the documents and dances I've discussed were created before I entered Marjorie's life in a serious way, but not before she entered mine. I knew Marjorie, but not as a dancer or a writer. To me she was an emissary from worlds urban, queer, bohemian, & poor, an emissary from New York City, in black. I romanticized her, called her, as a child, my "Yoko-Ono-aunt." I knew her figure, her hat and sunglasses, her poses, the cigarette, the enormous bag she would lug—schlep—all over the city. When I moved to New York, I still hadn't met many people like her, and I still haven't. I came to realize that people like her didn't *used* to exist, for when I suggest this to my father he tells me, "People like Marjorie never existed."

He grew up in the city, too, and he saw Marjorie through many traumas; he knew her longer than anyone, and balanced his sympathy for her with his respect for her, and for her limits, and for the way she chose to live her life, better than almost anyone. It might have to do with some genetic trace, the kind that compelled them both to assume a permanent contrarian posture, or to read voraciously, or to favor certain modifiers over others. They loved to call things "fascist," and they loved to say "fuck." And they were cagey, guarded. They kept things from their parents because their parents always seemed to be keeping things from them.

Illnesses were seldom announced. Schisms and fights—one over jewels and china and silver that had been inherited but sold in panic after the market crashed in 1929—were written out of the family's collective memory. When my grandmother died, in 1995, she let slip a number of family secrets. She told Marjorie about an incident just after the War when my grandfather mentioned to her a sister who had just died: Esther, who had been sent away and erased from the family's official history, sent away to live and die in the psychiatric ward of the Middletown State Homeopathic Hospital for the Insane.

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Nobody knew what had happened to Aunt Esther. She *might* have been pregnant and not married. She *might* have secured an abortion only to spend the century locked away. There was some talk about a murder she *might* have witnessed. Or maybe she was just perceived to be mad because the milieu in which she was born was too conservative, or too cautious, or too overwhelmed with fear about the machinations of a violent and volatile God to accommodate her. After my grandmother's admission, Marjorie became obsessed by Aunt Esther. She spent the rest of her life trying to figure out what happened to her aunt, to her father's sister, to revive her or at the very least to dance with her ghost.

In a letter, dated 2003, to the director of the hospital, Marjorie wrote,

All I know of my Aunt Esther is what I've just recounted, and anyone I can think of who might have known more (facts or legends—both would be interesting) is now deceased. Hence, it is impossible to reconstruct her life. But it is not her biography that I have in mind to dramatize.

It is, rather, the utter “lostness” of her life—or hers was surely a life that was “lost” in more than one sense of the word—that strikes me as significant.

The staff at the hospital told Marjorie that she could not see the records for legal reasons; Marjorie could consult a psychiatrist, she was told, and the hospital would release the records if he deemed that her mental health relied on knowing what had happened to Esther.

I don’t know what Marjorie was looking for. It couldn’t have been anything as obvious or as prosaic as an explanation for Esther’s confinement—though had it been, Marjorie probably would have had better luck gaining access to the records. I ask Phil, who suggests that Marjorie’s search had more to do with personal paranoia: she was afraid that she’d be locked away too. In some respects, her eccentricities pushed her to a limit of the social world, and not only because they looked or seemed or sounded like those infirmities that slowly take hold and will not let go. The dancer Kenneth King, in a loving obituary for Marjorie, said that she could have excelled at any number of other endeavors: “She would have made a terrific writer, professor, social scientist, or psychoanalyst, but dancing was the practice that most fulfilled her.” But it might be worth suggesting, too, that her eccentricities, the intensities of her focus and her obsessions, might have made her a candidate for any number of psychological disorders: Were she not so charismatic, had she not commanded the attention and devotion of friends, and were she not compelled by a sense of curiosity and determination that itself might be characterized as mad, Marjorie might have made a terrific paranoid schizophrenic, a hysteric, a savant. She did not always want her phobias to be known, and there is disagreement among her friends about whether or not to suppress stories, including the one about Esther. But these stories confirm everything about Marjorie. They confirm that she was authentically herself, and that her artistic ambitions were based on a personal necessity, a personal and not a public imperative: truth, depth, longing, regret, the essential self, the soul.

Marjorie never found out what happened to Aunt Esther, so she wrote her own narrative. She imagined that Esther might have had some clairvoyant contact with Lucia Joyce, who was a rough contemporary and was also mad. She made plans to dance the part of Esther atop a tower at the asylum while an audience watched with terror from the grass below. Eventually, in her last completed work, Marjorie showed the world the life of Esther. With two young, beautiful dancers—one in black and one in white—Marjorie depicted the interplay of sanity and madness, the way the prospect of going mad haunts the sane from the future’s dark frontier and how the mad are haunted by those traces, slanted memories, of sanity. In the last of three movements, Marjorie joined the dancers. She would be playing, she explained to us, the *brink* of madness. She lay on the floor and moved her head and arms—as she liked to say—“this way and that,” and defined that terrible limit. She smiled broadly when it was over, stood between the two dancers and took their hands and bowed.

Thinking of ghosts and members of my family, and the admission of family secrets, I think again of Marjorie’s death and also of my grandmother’s. We were away, my brother and mother and I, out of the country, too far to fly to New York for the funeral. My father recorded

it on a miniature cassette tape and when he came to join us he played it and my brother and I lay on the floor and listened to it and cried. And a year later, we came to New York, chartered a car, and drove with Marjorie and a few others out to the cemetery in Queens where generations of my family, about whom I knew and know very little, lay buried. We attempted to unveil the headstone on my grandmother's grave. It was windy, and by the time we arrived, by the time Marjorie, who was leading our party to the family plot, had found the headstone, whatever veil had been put on it had blown off. My brother took the scarf my mother was wearing and wrapped it around the stone, and we stood around for a few minutes. My mother asked my father to try and remember a few words of the Kaddish and he declined, and we piled back into the car and returned to the City.

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I reflect again on the papers. Phil collected them from Marjorie's storage locker, where in 2009 she hosted (illegally) a dozen performances of a dance called *Inside Story: Your Life in Storage, Your Life on Hold*; it reflected her eviction from her apartment and her cancer diagnosis, which occurred within weeks of each other. She hadn't known she'd been evicted because she hadn't thought to look at her mail. She found out upon returning home one evening to find her clothes, her books, all her belongings, on the curb. She might have imagined that another dancer, someone younger perhaps, someone who saw a future in front of her, would approach, see a chair or a lamp, collect it and walk off with it, head to some gallery or some basement, or some apartment whose guardians had allowed a stage and hot lights, with wine for sale, unofficially, where such objects could be revived. Her friends had always provided a network for her, and they did in this case, too. She would go to stay with Phil and eventually found another place, a unit in an SRO building on Eightieth Street that was unbelievably still in service, still subsidized.

It was around this time that I moved to New York. Marjorie took pride in her ability to recommend the perfect outing, and made a point to call me any time she thought of something I might like. In the summer especially, I became a regular fixture in her routine. She took me to free movies, old movies, after which we would talk for a few hours about all sorts of things. I always offered to buy her coffee, a gesture she accepted gratefully and which, because she did, I carried out with pride and quiet tenderness.

One afternoon stands out. It was a Sunday in July. It was raining terribly, torrentially. The trains weren't running on schedule and one of the avenues was closed for the Dominican parade; tourists brushed passed each other, streams of water cascading from the edges of their umbrellas and into the corners of my eyes. I was running late, was worried as I often am that I would be too late, and that Marjorie would leave and that I wouldn't know what to do. But then I walked west on Fifty-third Street and saw her perfect profile in the window of the theater at the Museum of Modern Art. She wore one of her enormous hats and dark glasses. She was stooped over a book that sat open in her hands, its corners in tatters, as always, her face, as always, cocked at an angle. We were going to see Morris Engel's new wave *Little Fugitive*, from 1953, about a young boy's

flight to Coney Island; he becomes acquainted with the world in its most deformed and alluring incarnation—an amusement park, crowded, wretched, cacophonous, modern, beautiful. This was a film Marjorie had enjoyed as a child and that she knew I'd enjoy, too. She looked up and saw me, smiled, took off her shades. She had learned a few days before that her cancer, which had been in remission, had returned. I didn't know and I thought and still think that she looked wonderful.

We went inside and sat down, looked around. We liked to laugh at the old people in New York City movie houses, those who fall asleep and those who yell at the projectionist, who are neighborly and nosey and who tell you to be quiet or take off your hat and who will do so in ways that are assertive, jarring, engaging, direct. I liked Marjorie best when we were being chastised by an elder, when I could see that she was caught off guard and amused with herself and could not help becoming something she hardly ever chose to be: relatable. These were moments to exploit. That afternoon, thinking of the denizens of New York's movie houses, thinking of her childhood in New York, thinking of Aunt Esther, I asked Marjorie if she believed in ghosts, believed in them the way one does or doesn't believe in God. She told me it was one of the most interesting questions she'd ever been asked. And as we left the museum—the rain having stopped, the clouds having parted—she told me something else I'd never known about her: summer, she said, was her favorite season, her favorite time to be in New York. Everyone is on the street. The noises, the light, the smells, the bodies, their movement.

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By the time Marjorie died, she had no illusions about getting better; she was able to get the drugs she needed to die in comfort. She may have been afraid, but I believe that the same means by which she was able to live in peace, even as the world was at war with her, allowed her to die in peace too. And this gives me peace.

Notes

¹ From a love letter to Christiane Volpius in Ludwig, Emil. *Goethe: A Man and his History*. 1928. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2003.

² This essay borrows from some of these documents, in particular those written and compiled by Sally Bowden, Bryan Hayes, and Kenneth King, and describes films and images taken and restored by Andrew Gurian, Jeff Bush, and Tom Brazil. I've also quoted liberally from the following texts, written by Marjorie and left among her papers: "A Proposal for a Seminar on the Subject of Chance" (2004), which would be submitted to Rutgers University had it ever been finished; her "Discourse on *The Enlightenment*" (1993), a letter to her friends and colleagues about the use of artificial light in her dances and about the eight-part video performance called *The Enlightenment*; a long letter to the superintendents of the Middletown State Homeopathic Hospital for the Insane; notes, I think, from her 2004 performance *Topsy's Lament* and two untitled childhood memoirs, one written in 1986 and the other in 2011. I also reflect on several of Marjorie's dances, including *At Turning Points* (1976); *Port of Asides* (1980); *Fugitive Furniture* (1983); *The Hour of the Horizon* (1985); *The Enlightenment* (unfinished) (1993); *Topsy's Lament* (2004); *Inside Story: Your Life in Storage, Your life on Hold* (2009); *After You* (2011).

³ "A Berlin Chronicle." *Reflections*. New York: Shocken, 1978.

⁴ Cage, John. *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1960.

⁵ Arrendt, Hannah. "Introduction." *Illuminations*. Walter Benjamin. New York. Shocken, 1969.

⁶ "The Face of Garbo." *Mythologies*. 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. London, Paladin, 1972.