



Me and the wild beast *by Amanda Abrams*

WE WERE IN THE STUDIO, TIRED AND SWEATY and almost finished with rehearsal, when our director suggested we run through a short piece we hadn't done in months.

"Do you want to go over it first, or just do it?" he asked.

"Let's just do it," I suggested. "Let's see how far muscle memory gets us."

So he put on the music and we started to dance, our bodies feeling their way, automatically guiding us through steps we could barely recall consciously. We weren't perfect; it was a little like hanging out with a friend you haven't seen recently, still lacking that easy vibe. But we did surprisingly fine.

I used to think the phrase "muscle memory" – the idea that your body will take you places even when your mind has forgotten the path – was a semi-bullshit term other dancers threw around to sound cool. I still don't think it's as descriptive as it could be, but more and more I can't deny that there seems to be a creature under the surface of my consciousness who inhabits my body but operates somewhat independently of me (whoever "me" is). And increasingly I feel that the only real wilderness left, or at least the only one I'm interested in exploring now, is the one that resides inside my skin.

But finding the way in is tricky. Starting out, it can be like stalking a wild beast: you've got to be very still and observe the scene. When I meditate these days, I don't just watch my breath and try to

stay free of badgering thoughts. I actually focus on my body – my chest and belly, perineum and spine – listening to how it feels and what it's saying.

Sometimes my body speaks in emotions. If I listen closely and patiently enough, it'll talk: *this situation is unbearable*, it'll say, *take this route instead*. It's a very wise creature with great judgment, did I mention that?

And sometimes it speaks in movement. A few days ago, I was improvising with another dancer; we were being wild and acrobatic, flying on each others' shoulders and backs. Suddenly I realized I'd lost my sense of where the floor was. Instead, I was spinning like a gyroscope, this way then that, at a pace my mind couldn't follow. At least my conscious mind. The wild beast in me, it turned out, knew where I was all along. And when I fell to the floor in what could've been a dangerous "thunk," it automatically knew to tuck my spine and pelvis in ways I hadn't realized I was capable of. Instead of landing with a splat, I rolled to safety.

I'm a beginner at this wild beast, wild-body stuff, but that's okay. There's a whole landscape waiting to be explored. And while it's hard to reach, there's something very un-ephemeral about this place. After all, it's grounded in my body, the most real, physical manifestation of who I am.

Amanda Abrams has lately developed a new fascination with walking very slowly. She lives in Washington, DC.