



miles & miles

Before it starts the woman next to me asks, in a tense whisper, *Is it real?* Our elbows are touching, our eyes are looking forwards and our concentration is on the two women standing on a piece of wood that is balanced on a brick at the front of the stage.

Is it real?

Here we are, elbows touching, eyes forward. There they are, elbows touching, eyes forward.

Dark hair, dark clothes, sensible shoes. Bodies touching, gently, as if for reassurance, or as if jostling for space. Not so much balanced, actually, as balancing. Legs shaking. Skin touching, as if jostling for space is the closest thing to reassurance, as if proximity is a kind of safeguard.

There they are. Each of them tied to one end of a coil of rope: one at the waist, one at the ankle. Each tied to the other as if they are ready to –

What's the word for it? That feeling - when your feet shuffle closer to the edge and your eyes look down and you think you might – ?

Here we are. There they are. Each of them tied to one end of a rope that is suspended from a metal hook hanging from the ceiling. *Is it real?* Thick rope. Old rope. The kind of thick, old rope that will burn your skin right off as it slips through your fingers. Elbows touching, eyes forward, holding onto something that is going to hurt.

In unison, they step off the piece of wood that is balancing on a brick; eyes forward, as if they are not dependent on one another for the act of unbalancing, as if they are not tethered to one another while time trails messily behind them. Separately, they wander round the room; eyes forward, as if they are individuals, as if being an individual is a possibility,

as if being alone is a material reality, like a belt or a film or the edge of the world. The rope ravel after them like a memory.

Is it real?

Here we are. Unbalanced. Tied in knots. What's the word? When your feet edge closer and you can't tell the difference between a gesture of companionship and a competition of proximity and the prelude to a push and – ?

Eyes forward, elbows touching. There she is. Speaking into a microphone, speaking in the voice of a half forgotten movie star and a scientist and a story you heard on the radio while you were eating your breakfast, lifting the spoon to your mouth with a silent rhythm as if you can stall for time before the day starts to ask its normal questions. There they are, speaking in casual voices to each other; eyes forward, as if this is not a matter of life and death,

as if their ankles, their waists and their elbows are not within touching distance, as if this whole matter of beginnings and endings and being entangled is not a landscape of invisible precipices but something man-made like a stage. Is it real? One of them says, 'nice navigation' and the other one nods, as if the route she has taken all round the edges of the room was the answer to a question that hasn't yet been –

Are you the kind of person who will find yourself walking up the tallest thing you can see? (The steps, the cliff, the soft, purple hill of your memories.) And when you get there, are you the kind of person who will feel your toes slide right to the edge? And then, are you the kind of person who will shut your eyes into the fresh breeze beckoning you from below? To breathe it in; this cool, clean, unusual air? And then, are you the kind of person who will reach out for something to hold onto?

Is it real?

They tug the past behind them as they turn. It whips elegant shapes into the air and collapses in knots. They rush to the front of the stage and dance. Two women, eyes forward, hands shaking (sometimes), bodies moving (quickly), as if they are being moved by something like a memory. They separate. One person rocks backwards

and forwards on a squeak in a floorboard. One person speaks the words of a man in the flat planes of a white stretch at the edge of the world. One person reads out plans for beginnings and endings and middles, as if this is not an event but a never-ending rehearsal, as if she is not on a flat, wide, man-made stage but inside a vast, white waiting room perched on a cliff at the edge of –

And when you reach out will you reach out instinctively or will you curl your tongue round some words, to ask for something? And will you use your own voice, or borrow someone else's?

Is it real?

Here we are.

Wandering across the cliff-tops of a wide, flat waiting room that no-one else can see. Here we are, rocking backwards and forwards on a floorboard that groans under the pressure; here we are, arranging our limbs in the shape of a person

falling, a person suspended in the act of descent, a person training for the unknown, a person who knows that when it happens all the preparation with the rope and the skin and the balancing and the words will be a kind of –

Here we are.

One of us concentrates her eyes and her finger tips on the effort not to –

Eyes forward. Remaining, remaining, remaining, remaining –

And when you reach out what will you find to hold onto? (A memory, a burden, a razor-sharp ledge.) And will you grip it so tightly that you hear it rip? (Your balance, your memory, your fingertips.) And will it rip until the tough brown hide of a rope or an arm caught in the flat dawn sun is waving against a powder blue sky or a burnt yellow rock or a bottomless pit, depending on your view? And are you the kind of person that likes to plan how this is going?

Here we are. Tied in knots,

the past whipping itself into shapes that other people can see. The past curling itself into messy knots and there's nothing we're going to do about it but choose whether to secure our memories to our bellies or our feet. Eyes forward, gazing at the horizon, real, imagined or as seen on TV, as if our minds are not a vast white expanse but a landscape of cliff tops, edges and long, dark, bottomless –

Is it real?

Here we are. Holding on. Waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting for the horizon to come close enough to touch it with our fingertips, tie it round our waists and trail it behind us like a good story. Is it real? Here we are, bowing our heads and lifting our feet, unravelling, heels pushing into groaning wood, toes falling into –

Here we are.

Balancing, balancing, balancing –

*Mary Paterson saw **miles & miles** on Thursday 7th July 2016 at Chisenhale Dance Space, London.*

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