

Anti-gravity: Upward Mobility on Silk

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you got a mean streak,
get real mean sometimes.
doctor says you can't have salt.
less, you mumble,
none, she says.
if you refuse the prescription, none.

what you're dealing with here is life and death, she says,
extreme risk,
invisible,
what makes it so dangerous.
high-pressure force,
strong enough to
invert,
from the inside out.

they call it the silent killer for a reason, she says,
you go on about your way,
drink your bourbons neat,
season meat 'til it smells like youth.

your heart is like a pressure cooker, she says,
vessels stress then pop,
stop you dead in a stroke.

heart-break
won't see it coming

it *is* silent, you say,
not invisible, though,
your mother's was an elephant, rest her soul,
both grandmothers, three aunts, too.

if gravity is law, as she says,
& even the elements an enemy,
might as well risk the fall,
to pull illusion free.



silky aspirations

You see the image on the company's computer screen, at the company's desk, behind the company's three-by-three cubicle wall. The company's workload is heavy, but the image asks you to stop for a while and consider how attention-seeking behavior isn't always so bad after all. Besides, the self-effacement game you've been playing until now hasn't exactly made you any healthier, happier, or more able to fit in other people's boxes. This image has you wondering if the gravity around you can somehow be evaded, and who you'd be, how you'd manage, without it.

It makes you recall Audre's words on silence and Zora's resistance to shyness. You consider Toni's warning about focusing on distractions, rather than on your real work—whatever that might be—and where the displaced gaze gets you in the end. They all seem to speak through this singular reflection of a woman: black, wide, wise with her body, floating at the top of a room, her chest a horizontal plane, her lower back perched on a silken knot. She is spreading and dangling her limbs in every direction from above: uppity, birdlike, looking at you:

Baby, what's so bad about being seen?

You've observed similar images of acrobatic circus performers, but none like this. They were pale, spindly shadows, hued in fluorescent lights and crystal-coated leotards, eyelids exaggerated with jade feathers, cheeks amplified in layers of gold. Their vibrancy felt cartoonish, irrelevant, too many worlds away. What a goofy ass bore, you always thought. What did they know about pulling tricks, juggling work, disappearing acts, madness?

But acrobatic art was made for the gaze, and this image makes you look beyond the look. It is captured behind the scenes—a candid from a training session or warm-up practice, perhaps—with no costumes in sight. Something about the blurred grey of the room and the tattered flimsiness of her clothing draws you in: that nostalgic luxury of working with what one has, the less-is-more approach to craftsmanship. You suspect that this "realness" you perceive has been staged somehow—that it's all on trend, not unlike the minimalist white-wall/wood-floor/green-plant aesthetic in every R&B-playing café and artisan pop-up shop in town. You reckon it's all connected, and assume you're the target buyer: the kind that seeks escape from your abysmal center of non-exotic non-existence; the elder millennial grown weary of social media but longing to participate lest find yourself missing from the collective archive; the inner artist child that grew too thin from hunger and too tall too fast.

Whatever the marketing tactic, this image says, ridiculous as you know it sounds, that you—invisible, thirty-somethinged, hyper-tense you—can somehow manage

to dangle and stunt from the ceiling, too. You suspect it will take some time, years probably, and might be harder on your body than you imagine. You suspect there will be costs, but probably no more than the sum of what you endured by the time you were fifteen, certainly no more than the words you swallow every day like your mother did her cocktail of prescription drugs. And still your mother taught you that though there ain't no anti- that fixes antipathy for long, it feels good to be seen, anyway.

So what exactly *is* the silken wave she's riding? What amount of tension is entailed in the climb up, in executing the pose, over and over again? You wonder what it's like to be dark and wide and woman and in sync with your own body; to have the mental space for practice, to focus on something other than heartbreak for longer than five minutes; to be fly without the pressure of desire on your bones; to curse gravity in this way, and suspend your own disbelief.

** The term "gravity" carries several meanings. In physics, it is a force that pulls a mass downward, toward the center of the earth or another, larger body of mass. In social terms, it is a force of significance or importance. It is also commonly referred to as a weight of seriousness and sobriety, perhaps in one's work ethic, disposition, or sense of self. Between all definitions, we can think about the downward "pull" of gravity at work.*

** Antigravity is generally used within the natural sciences: a "reducing, canceling, or protecting against the effects of gravity."*

** Here I further suggest the notion of anti-gravity, to speak of reducing, canceling, or protecting against the weight of quests for praxis in social and moral aspects of being. Anti-gravity addresses the friction between theory and practice by re-centering movement that is neither in resistance nor fugitivity, but of renegotiating the illusion of any coherent upward mobility.*

but actually, silk is not made to be climbed

Finding it is difficult enough. You turn another lonely road before spotting the isolated, seemingly vacant warehouse, its exterior walls smeared in faded paint and chipped postings. Someone will eventually open the door and lead you into the dimmed gym. You see a few towering ladders stationed beside the thick vertical plane of shiny turquoise fabric fastened to the industrial ceiling by carabiners nearly too far to see. The ladders look unapproachable—too dangerous to touch, let alone climb—but the silk has a chimeric quality that brings you back to the image. You admire the promise of its slip.

To identify the limits of your flexibility, the coach recommends that you stretch in wristlocks with the silk before attempting to climb. This wristlock is different from the ones that have been done to you, to hold you in place. While the point is still

to restrict the wrist and hand joints, in this case, it is you who will manipulate the material, developing mastery over *its* unruliness. And this will be the first and most important lesson to learn for the duration of your practice.

It takes many attempts to figure out how to lock the material at the same height on both arms. Once you do, you quickly learn the dynamics of your relationship with it—how a slight movement in the wrong direction can result in incredibly uncomfortable positions. The silk irritates, embarrasses, humbles you. You try the same with your ankles, making self-shackled “foot locks” that lift you a foot or so off the ground. The fabric pulls too tightly on your skin and bone, and your heart races from panic once you realize you cannot safely undo the trap without following a specific protocol that you did not fully grasp. In the meantime, your guide is holding up one of your legs and speaking slowly, but you cannot hear her outside of your anxieties. One foot is stuck within the tangled web of relentless material, the other is hopping to relocate its nerve endings. Struggling to manage the body’s panic and create a new center of balance, you consider that perhaps silk is not made to be climbed after all.

You mean, sure, anyone can do anything within reason, and some people do this well—particularly those that started in their youth when their nimble muscles memorized new languages with ease. But it is best to keep your aspirations in check before beginning such an expensive habit. It is not as if you can do anything substantial with it, despite what your coach sells. She says the silk can be anything once you master it, but reason says that climbing cloth is just for show; there is no real purpose of utility, such as with a ladder or staircase. Conquering fabric will not take you to another level of stability or help you get anywhere any faster. And how it works the nerves! You have to grapple with all its unbearable thickness when it refuses to cooperate. Its threads will eventually rub your hands from raw to calloused, burn your lower back and slice your inner thigh the second you lose control of your core. It will grind under your knees. It will fold inside your ribcage until you can’t breathe.

Indeed, silk will trap your body in a web of pain. And only after you learn this on a visceral level can you do anything with it at all.

how to climb silk

Now that you have tested your wrists and ankles and everything is undone, you can begin to learn to climb. There is no locking involved at this stage—only training your grip and intuition. It feels as tricky as it appears. Like water, the silk responds to your every touch. You must remind yourself that you are in control, fiercely gather all the material in one hand, and create a single opening through which the

width of your hips can weave in between. You have not worked your hands enough to create friction, so your initial efforts will feel futile. The shocking sensation will come once you realize that your hands have slid over the sleek fabric a second too soon, and it has split you wide open. Ignore this, and, as with the locks, shift your attention to the feet. Use the ball of one foot to hold the silk in place on top of the other, which will undoubtedly slide out of the way. Remember that with unformed callouses, everything will slide. Your goal now is not to climb, but to thicken your skin in an effort to do so, the quicker the better.

As callouses develop, you learn that neither hands nor feet alone make the climb work; they are just place-markers. The real engine of the motion comes from your hips, and there really is nothing to it once you get the form down. Callouses help you to grip the fabric and hang. Hang there a moment, and open your legs. You can bring both feet together at once, a simultaneous catching and locking the fabric between them. Or wrap one leg around it like you would a lover and hold it in place with the opposite foot. That's it, you're in a groove. And now, to keep the feet feeling secure, hold them horizontally, as if you are making your own little stairway in the air. Pull up your knees and stand yourself up with your core. It is not intuitive, but engage the hip, all the time. There is your form.

You're climbing with ease now, and with all the pressure gone from your hands and feet, you feel able-bodied, all swift motion and long length. You arrive to the top without breaking a sweat. It occurs to you that, all things considered, this climb was really never about your strength or specialness, and only about some uniform technique. In the end, it costs very little blood, sweat, or tears to do it; yet here you are, some twenty feet in the air. Just a moment off the ground feels like a prize. Damn, you can't believe this was such an easy come-up.

But it's really just the beginning. In no time, you are quickly running out of breath. Panic arises again because you have already forgotten the protocol for safely getting down. Your hands are also giving out—they burn, they are tired—and you cannot imagine following more technicalities to reverse the trip. You made it to the peak, and you have about three more seconds up there. What will be the harm in letting go and sliding a mere twenty feet, especially when there is a thick safety cushion beneath you? Time is up, you release the grip and let gravity do its thing.

But hindsight is twenty-twenty, and twenty feet is far as hell. The mistake is now evident as you sit with more raw cuts, dull pain, and the coach yelling that the climb is only half as important as what comes after it. She demands that you start over again, quickly now, to become even on both sides. Realizing the mat is far less supportive than it looks, you experience another downward pull from allowing yourself to actually feel what is happening. Everything hurts now, including the memory of

the fall. But your tears go unnoticed. You get back up, this time leading with the other hand, and climb again. It's never as good as the first time.

No one explained that the rise would take so little, the peak be so exhausting, or the descent so critical. No warning that once you were down, you would have no time to rest before starting again. That layers of skin would break open. Your guides would frown and say you must train to the point of mastery if you want to be bird-like. But you would rather become your own master.

You recall how Kerry re-negotiated the whole canon by way of his own mastery in painting. How he said there are no mysteries in the work of his artistic brilliance—he puts it all out there, crystal clear. How he does the work to reach this level, to the point of becoming the history of the level himself. How he reaches the height to determine his own range of mobility, at his own will, with nothing to prove to anybody. Because only through this point of genius in action can you genuinely explore what is possible in the highs, lows, and in-betweens. This, he says, is mastery: freedom, being unrestrained through non-lacking in ability or knowledge. So you go on with the work.

You remember the beautiful graceful figure and wonder if she has gone through the same process. You remember that the force of gravity is universal to anything bearing mass—painters and dancers alike. That she could stay up high a long time and look good all the while, but she too would descend to solid ground.

She walks by, still advertising grace. She wears the practice like a cloak, and you wonder how it is wearing on her.

the hardest part is moving in the air

Today you think you see the birdlike figure meet your gaze in the air. She is doing a complicated move that ends in the “death drop,” a dramatic dive from the hip basket she crocheted by repeatedly weaving her legs through both strands of silk. You know the drop is coming from her long, grip-less pause at the ceiling, but it produces a force of air that has a visceral effect, leaving you paralyzed in your own elevated resting place. She dives into a downward spiral and catches herself upright with calculated precision, transforming her silk from board to pool, land to water, like magic. But you don't believe in magic, not even the black-girl kind. She is a mastr of illusion, until illusion is made crystal clear, and you learn to respect the technique.

Being safe in the air means tricking gravity into submission. To do this, you must keep moving until you're ready to fall with intention. But continuous movement presumes a strong core and a tighter focus, neither of which you have developed.

So, you learn to do small tricks: spinning in place, isolating motion in one limb at a time, twirling and descending through various shapes named after objects found in nature. You learn the fundamental trick to maintain balance while spinning: keep your gaze on a single moving point, always on your body, never on the silk or, god forbid, anyone watching.

This self-centered approach seems risky at first. You want to know how your movement is affecting the others—if the coach approves, if the birdlike figure even sees—to gauge how your future audience might too react. The elevated status brings up some insecurities, naturally. You are never quite stable for long, and your every action is visible at every angle. You surely signed up to be seen, so it must matter what they all think. Isn't group consensus the true test of your practice? Mustn't this all be for everyone else, those trapped in boxes, those suffocating from pressure, the kids? But as soon as your gaze shifts away from your toenail toward the birdlike figure, the you can barely hang on, the illusion breaks, and no one in the room is entertained. The sequence cannot work if you acknowledge others, not even in your periphery.

You learn that the illusive performance is nothing more than a dance with the self.

** The silk climber invokes anti-gravity at every stage of her performance. Her climb illustrates the necessity of counterintuitive training of the body to propel upward. She remains visible only through a sequence of letting go and holding on again, oscillating her various limbs, joints, and muscles—each a source of motion, flexibility, or strength—between flex and rest in any given moment. Her performative art is a sequence of manipulation. Her pauses remain strategic.*