



Good Things Remain

PALOMA LISA MCGREGOR

LAST SUMMER, I WAS INVITED TO DANCE PIONEER KATHERINE DUNHAM'S NINETY-THIRD BIRTHDAY PARTY, AT THE PRESTIGIOUS JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE FESTIVAL IN BECKETT, MASSACHUSETTS. THING IS, I DIDN'T HAVE A GIFT.

I mean, what do you get for an anthropologist who, back in the '30s, became a leading authority on folk dance in the Caribbean? What do you give an artist who developed her own dance technique that is still taught in such renowned institutions as the (Alvin) Ailey School? What do you present to an activist who, despite immense political pressure, insisted on creating and performing a ballet about the brutal murder of Emmett Till?

All I had was my fervor for dance, born in the US Virgin Islands, where I grew up. At eight, I decided to forgo recess for dance classes with the Caribbean Dance Company held in my elementary school's auditorium. I soon signed up for ballet, modern, and Afro-Caribbean dance classes in the sun-drenched church hall that the company called home. There I discovered the joy of movement. Nothing since has matched it.

At ten, my family began a moving cycle—from Hawaii to California, Illinois to Florida—that lasted through high school, and, by my mid-teens, I had grown frustrated with looking for nurturing dance teachers. So I quit and took up writing instead.

But the dancer spirit in me wouldn't die. As a journalism major at Florida A & M University in the early 1990s, I was inspired to dance again when I sat in on a West African technique class. Through the infectious heartbeat rhythms, the sweat-soaked spirit of movement, I reconnected with my dance roots. I had come home.

I became a journalist anyway, figuring I'd be satisfied with "dancing on the side." Yet after five years as a newspaper reporter and editor with the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, I knew this wasn't enough. I found what I was looking for in 1998, in the makeshift dance studio of a start-up dance company, Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre. After working all day, I rushed to take

ballet and modern dance classes and rehearse with the company late into the night. I was dancing without a salary, but my soul was being enriched. I was learning more than technique. I was learning that it's never too late to fulfill your life's passion.

Two years ago, I left my journalism career to pursue my graduate degree in dance at Case Western Reserve. Some saw the switch as a risky proposition. Perhaps part of me did, too.

So when I learned last spring that I was one of twenty-four dancers accepted to study with Ms. Dunham at Jacob's Pillow, I sobbed. After such a circuitous path back to dance, this was a much-needed affirmation.

In the waning days of the festival, Ms. Dunham taught a three-hour dance class—from her wheelchair. Afterward, I sat sweaty and fatigued at her feet, transfixed by her black opal eyes. As she spoke, I hoped her gleaming gaze would fall on mine and, in that moment, transmit a piece of wisdom that would help me comprehend my journey, my place, my potential.

Although it was her birthday, in truth, I was looking for a gift from her.

Her rich, raspy voice obliged. "I don't need to know tomorrow. I need to know there is a tomorrow and that I'm a part of it," she said. "I hope those things that have been good that I have done will remain."

With those words, I realized I had something to give after all: reclaiming my life in dance. Ms. Dunham's work paved the way for me to chart my own road to dance. As long as I keep dancing in her footsteps—and beyond—the good she has done will indeed remain.

That is perhaps the greatest gift I could give. 🎁

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