

# A New Spin:

Inside (and upside-down and all around) the art of pole dancing . . . and why it's not just for strip clubs anymore.

---

(Yale Manifesta: Fall, 2009)

I don't remember the name of the first strip joint I went to, but I do remember what I was wearing: chocolate-brown silk cut in a plunging V almost to my waist, ruched up the bodice, tied in a knot behind my neck. It left my shoulders bare and little to the imagination.

Indeed, it was a dress — unusual garb for someone walking through the club's front door, rather than the one marked "Private" that swung in from an alleyway out back. I was fresh from my first week working aboard a research vessel stationed off the coast of Sausalito, and after seven days towing plankton and cooking for a ship-ful of hairy Toms and Dicks, I'd gotten used to swearing, spitting, and all the rest. Like my fellow sailors, I was ready to clean up. And I have to say, I clean up good.

Legs tanned and tripping in champagne-colored heels, I'd come ashore ready to celebrate; it didn't feel strange at all to be dressed to suggest, the only woman in a group of men, walking into the plush velvet embrace of a place that allowed more than mere suggestion. Where sailors dock in North Beach, the bars are all strip clubs. So into the club I went.

There, women wearing little more than tinsel and gauze slathered themselves across me and my male crewmates alike, asking what we wanted — a drink? A dance? A private room and a bit of time alone . . . together? The guys only went so far as a few rounds of whiskey. While they all pretended to concentrate on taking shots, I was staring transfixed at the stage. There, dancers challenged, more than the boundaries of decency, the boundaries of gravity. They were drawing themselves up brass poles like spiders up the waterspout, turning over and around and almost inside out. Willingly. Weightlessly. Without a care. I left that evening with my experiences broadened — not horizontally, as my circumstances might have implied, but rather, vertically.

That night in the brown dress was the relic of a strange time in my life: I had taken a year off from being a young lady at Yale University to hitchhike around with a notebook and camera. Far removed from classes like "The Feminization of Poverty," away from roommates selling "consensual sex" cookies outside the local hotspot, and nowhere near the streets of New Haven, where I've since become accustomed to whistles and hollers, I was a person who felt fine walking into a strip club to marvel at the dancers without thinking too much of it.

Some time since returning to Yale, I lost the brown dress. I traded in the champagne shoes for a pair of beat-up cowboy boots, and I traded the memory of those twirling pinwheel ladies for the chatter of books and the knowledge that bodies are sometimes looked at in bad ways. But as my boots take me along Pratt Street in Hartford, Connecticut, on a blustery, russet day in fall, the women have once again begun to wind themselves through my thoughts.

I'm looking for Pole Control Studios, a new all-female exercise facility where, I understand, it isn't exactly crunches that get the tummies toned. As I walk, autumn leaves, just starting to flare fire, shake loose in the breeze and scuttle along the pavement. On either side of the wide cobbled street, old-fashioned brick storefronts with protruding bays create a rhythm: step step step, *window*, step step step, *sign*. Step step step, *window*, step step step — *sign*. Whoa. Glittery, purple sign. Painted with the life-sized silhouette of a woman who is *definitely* flaring fire. I raise my eyebrows, but she's the only one around to see.

"OK," I present myself to her, taking in the curlicue letters that spell about Pole Control above her head. "Don't laugh."



Pole Control is part of a stealthy trend that has recently begun to surface: exotic dancing establishments where customers don't watch, they *do*. According to the United States Pole Dance Federation — yes, there is one, and it just celebrated its first birthday — pole dancing is a “sensual, athletic dance form that demands coordination, flexibility and physical strength.” In its current incarnation as fitness fad, the sport is taking the nation by storm.

A cursory investigation of the USPDF website reveals an Alabama-to-Wyoming index with links to the web-pages of affiliated studios, all the ripples of an “international wave of modern exotic dance” that crashed onto US shores with the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, the advent of a new millennium seems to have brought with it Liberty and Striptease for All, as there is hardly a state in the union that doesn't boast at least one dance studio where a woman can exercise — her first amendment right to express herself — on a flagpole. Which is how I've come to be standing in the middle of Pratt Street, cowboy boots and all, with the Federation's words ringing in my ears: “It's significant to understand that pole dancing is not stripping. This misconception prevents pole dancing from becoming something every woman should be able to enjoy.”

When I had first stumbled across this admonition, I wasn't quite sure what to make of the extraordinary idea that a woman might *enjoy* spinning up and down a brass pipe like a carousel horse.

Indeed, that *I* might enjoy it. Schooled as an Ivy-covered feminist, shouldn't I unravel at the validation of a cultural activity steeped in preoccupation with the display and performance of the female body? Exotic dancing, shouldn't I argue, reduces a woman to the status of sex object, and creates a collective understanding of the self as devalued and dehumanized? Furthermore, shouldn't I (expound? exclaim? Where's my soapbox?), it is degrading and immoral and *completely unsanitary!* *Ewww!*

At first, I had certainly thought so. Now confronted by my inquisitor, the glittery purple vixen guarding Pole Control's door, I hesitate once again. I must admit it was with some derision that I had perused the Pole Control website (also glittery and purple), silently mouthing the words "Fitness for the Sensual Body and Soul." Pole dancing, the site claimed, teaches women to embrace their femininity and love their curves! Pole Control, it crowed, is a place for everyday women to empower themselves!

By swinging around on a stick stuck in the ground? It sounded like a pretty trashy alternative to hitting the elliptical. I had tried to spin it, in my mind, as a fun, supportive, woman-centric workout: love thyself, love thy body, love thy curves right off thy butt. I had tried to picture what empowerment looked like. It looked like a lot of desperate housewives in gym shorts and tube socks. I could imagine them comparing thunder thighs.

Needless to say, it seemed dubious.

But then, I remembered North Beach. Those strong, lithe women flying. Was there, a mere town away in Hartford, a place where *I* could learn to fly like that? Perhaps the feminist in me was coming at this thing the wrong way! I set aside the paradigm in which victimized female is reduced to the sum of her (very fine) parts. Instead, I unearthed the somewhat dustier trope of the erotic dancer as perpetrator of a dangerous deviance. I reveled: wasn't there something under all that dust that I could *reclaim*? I could disparage the tradition of crusty old scholars stigmatizing a tantalizing dancer they only *wished* they could have (Me! Oh, it's Me!), then scorn their pitiful attempts to rescue her from certain fragmentation and ultimate breakdown under the relentless chisel of the male Gaze. I could be risqué! I could transcend boundaries! I could work off the two months of chocolate chip cookies that had adhered themselves to my hips ever since my roommate learned to bake!

Thinking the hard and fast feminist might change her tune if she tried a little twirling — hard and fast — I decided to strap on my dancing shoes, and see how empowered I felt the next time someone hollered that I had a nice . . . something. *Zaaapp!* I would whirl around and glower with laser-beam eyes. *No you don't. Me and my lady friends do . . . POLE DANCING!*

A few clicks later I had closed the Pole Control website, looked up the train schedule to Hartford, and landed myself in front of the studio, ready to investigate.

Excitement restored, I bid the silhouette adieu, and look for a glittery purple doorbell.



“Ok, we’re going to start with a basic Chair,” says Lela, owner of Pole Control. I look around for props, thinking of Liza Minnelli doing *Mein Herr*. Exercise equipment lines the wall; the studio also offers yoga, pilates, weight training, and, I have learned from an intense-looking blonde outfitted in Adidas, a “booty boot camp” that has just kicked her where I suppose it was intended to.

There’s a poster featuring one of those skinned red muscle-people, front and back, labeled “Anatomy of the Human Female,” pinned above a laundry basket of multi-colored feather boas. There is my fellow student Denise, who matches my anticipated mental picture, complete with tube socks. There is an entire wall lined with mirrors that reflect me in my little shorts, looking a little ill-at-ease. There are nine gleaming brass poles. I see no chairs.

Lela grabs the nearest pole with one arm high and one low. Like a pneumatic machine, she lifts her feet from the floor and bends her knees smoothly toward her chest, as if seated. Denise, next to me, jumps onto her pole, splats against it, and jiggles loudly to the floor. Learning from her misplaced enthusiasm, I try to pull myself like deadweight, from sheer arm strength. I fare a little better. I’ve managed to rise up lightly — about an inch. I wrench my eyes from the floor. Lela is six feet in the air. Gasping, I drop to the ground.

Lela began class (“Pole Discovery Introduction”) by teaching us a series of holds: the baseball grip, the overhead head double-cup, the half bracket. Now, she is giving us detailed instructions for an acrobatic turn around the pole. After a few ill-fated attempts, I’m surprised that I can actually maneuver without fear of grave injury, but it is nothing — *nothing* — compared to what Lela can do. She gives us a show while we practice, floating up into inversions and spins, flitting like a bird, drawing lines in the air. She demonstrates a move called the Tinkerbelle, flowing through herself like water, swirling around the pole, legs and back all one arc extended behind. Just before spiraling all the way to the floor, she swings her legs up overhead, grabbing the pole with her calves. She hangs there in midair, arms free and extended. Surveying our progress from above, she warns us to be careful.

“Approach the pole smoothly; I’ve had people chip their teeth in here.” She is dangling nonchalantly from her ankles. “I’ve even seen a lady rupture her breast implant.”

Whew. At least I don’t have to worry about *that*. I attempt another Chair, arms burning. Softly, Lela lands on the ground.

By the end of the class, I can do a Fireman, a Figurehead, and a Snake; I can Reverse my Chair and Pirouette; and I can admit tentatively, if only to myself, that I look kind of good. My absolute favorite move is the Ballerina, an elegant spin in which I must hold the pole with one hand, lean off center, and then wrap the pole behind my knee, launching into the air off the opposite foot. I practice the Ballerina until my palms are raw. I can no longer bend my fingers, and what appears to be a small melon is slowly growing from my left calf. There is little doubt in my mind: this ballerina will not be able to walk tomorrow.

I can't remember ever feeling like this after going to the gym.



Exotic dancing in traditional clubs has always teetered on a precarious line between legal and illegal. Rules governing strip clubs vary from state to state in the US, regulating precisely what constitutes nudity or vulgarity, and begetting some of the art form's idiosyncrasies — for example, the little tasseled pasties worn to keep dancers from “revealing the female nipple.” In some states, nudity is acceptable, though spreading the legs is considered obscene. Clubs that allow complete nudity generally outlaw alcohol, while clubs that are “topless” serve beverages. These require that dancers remain at least partially clad, though, in practice, underwear in such establishments has evolved into small, vestigial specimens of what essentially amounts to dental floss for the pelvic region.

Reviewing legal stipulations surrounding the relatively tamer exercise craze, I was surprised to uncover debate over zoning codes classifying the studios as “adult establishments.” After all, aren't these merely fitness clubs? Geared towards wholesome mommy-types? With two hours of Pole Control under my belt, I still couldn't say what sort of patron this sudden excess of exotic instruction was aimed at. I myself had gone in with a far-from-just-fitness agenda, hell-bent on rectifying the sins of, and simultaneously charming the pants off, centuries of dead guys who have been saying mean things about pretty girls since Salome. Unsure if this was a common ambition, or merely symptomatic of a Yale education combined with a repressed childhood during which I was not allowed to own Barbies, I had boarded another train. Instead of going north to Hartford, I headed south, to Exotic Dance Central in New York City.

At EDC, not only could I take "Intro to Pole Dancing for Beginners," but also, "Advanced Pole Inversions 2-Hour Workshop," "Lap Dancing for the Continuing Student," and a class called "Jiggle It Wiggle It." At \$60 a pop (triple the price of Pole Control), these sessions were definitely not for a New England mother dropping in between Little League and Rice-a-Roni. Those girls with more of a

“professional” bent could write the cost off as career development, but what about the rest of us? The Exotic Dance Central website suggested that my six week Martha Graham Modern Dance workshop in high school might help with Beginning Sensual Floorwork . . . but looking at the photos, I was pretty sure this place was for the pros.



Exotic Dance Central is squeezed into an unlikely second floor slice of Midtown between Fifth and Madison. I’m just in time for the bi-monthly Friday Girl’s Night Out – a cross between a studio open-house and raucous party, complete with champagne, music, and performances by local professionals. I’ve been welcomed in by the center’s business manager, Donyale, and by Alieesah, the artistic director. The Friday night gatherings, the two explain, are designed to let students show off their moves and sneak-peek the type of dancing that they might someday hope to master (*or mistress*, as the case may be). Indeed, the familiar refrain — fun, fitness and exploration in a supportive environment — takes on new meaning when I learn that EDC often shepherds dancers into the professional world.

Most exotic dancers are independent contractors, “freelancers” paying a flat rate to a club and making their money through tips on the pole and lap dances between sets. EDC, however, has formed a company not unlike any other professional dance troupe. Thus incorporated, company dancers can book venues and negotiate, in advance, the cost of a show, giving them leverage most erotic entertainers could never dream of. Students who have been taking classes at the Center long enough are invited to twice-yearly auditions for a coveted spot in the company. “Our focus is on the art form,” Alieesah assures me, when I ask her about the rising popularity of dancing for fitness. “You’re going to get toned, yes, sure, but you’re going to learn how to *really* move.”

One hour later, the bass is throbbing. The lights are off. The stereo is pumping out Soft Cell’s *Tainted Love*, and I’m supposedly learning how to “really move.” At Donyale’s behest, I’ve signed up for EDC’s sampler package, my “best chance to get a taste of everything.”

Everything, in this case, means a smattering of not only pole dancing, but floorwork, partnered lap dances, and something our instructor (a snaggletooth redhead in some sort of gothic, leathery-winged bat costume) keeps referring to as “exotic undulation.” The polished wood floor is covered with a litter of gaudy feathers, shed from a brief exploration of striptease accompanied by boas. The Bat is on the floor in front of me and my nine classmates, demonstrating how to writhe down to the ground, grab the heels of our stripper-shoes (hers are six-inches and Lucite; mine, three inches and borrowed)

and gyrate our raised pelvises through the air, in rough approximation of a wind-up toy that's stuck in carpeting. The way she instructs us, every action has an implied recipient — "Now really grind; make him drool." It is because of EDC's "trade" focus, I assume, that an invisible man seems to have entered the room when I wasn't looking. Under his scrutiny, I feel ridiculous. I stare harder at The Bat, hoping for enlightenment vis-a-vis appropriate drool-inducing technique. She flips to her belly, revealing a rogue orange boa-feather stuck to her bare, sweaty rump. This, apparently, is what the road to professionalism looks like.

All around, my classmates are losing focus. One takes a phone call. Another is looking for her purse. A third, clad in a purple one-piece halter leotard, is trying earnestly to do the moves, but finds the anterior position to be presenting an unforeseen challenge: "Ow, ow owwww. I can't *do* this. I just got my thing pierced yesterday, and this floor is *killing* me!"

Thing. Thing. My mind is racing. I try to determine if thing can mean anything other than *thing*, and I sadly conclude that, indeed, it cannot. She is slithering around gingerly on her stomach. To quell any mental images before they arise, I try to focus on the music.

*Sometimes I feel I've got to (thud thud) run away, I've got to (thud thud) get away.*

Mortified, I close my eyes, pleading for Soft Cell to take me home.



No dearth of ink has been spilled over the deconstruction of exotic dancing, and, in sparkling contrast to the worn-out politics of pornography theorists and the deviance rhetoric of criminologists, much of the newest penmanship has been glittery-pink. Post-post-feminists, riding the third wave, are challenging essentialist views of womanhood — especially those contending that women engaged in the sex or porn industries are doomed to be dragged down by stigma or shame. Stripping thus emerges as salvation for the female surfing toward independence — an enabler of such diverse activities as attending college and buying expensive shoes without having to reach (at least, figuratively) into the pockets of a man. This contemporary wave of authors are breaking out the rose-colored Chanel, and many dancers, amateur and professional, active and retired, are happy to wear them.

Even women writing about their dancing years long after they've left the profession and graduated college, those for whom the need to rationalize must surely have subsided, those who have accumulated the requisite set of university-approved rhetoric with which they *could* paint a bleak picture of the trade . . . generally speaking, don't. They don't carp.

Complaints tend to arise not from the profession in theory, but from the particulars of the practice. The lack of healthcare and job security, the dangerous parking lots where misguided customers can lurk, the difficulty of finding childcare: these are cited more often than *the nightly indignity of having to take off my clothes*. For the most part, dance practitioners seem to remain sold on their careers.

“If I could go back and change it,” claims author and erstwhile entertainer Sarah Katherine Lewis, “I wouldn’t.”

Out of the classroom and into the audience of New York’s girlie scene, however, I am not convinced that exotic dancing has remained the empowering experience newcomers are taught it can be. At clubs with names like Sin City and Lace, vapid pole routines serve as a menu cataloguing the vacant simulations available to patrons for a fee. Women with their minds somewhere else wrap around the pole like wet laundry, languid, or perhaps spare a shiver meant to entice takers into ordering a lap dance — the customer’s steak and potatoes, and the entertainer’s bread and butter. After watching a number of these affairs, they become predictable. I hear The Bat’s instruction’s echoing in my ears: walk walk *spread*, grind grind grind, foot on shoulder, shake shake shake. Make him drool.

One night, prepared for such a string of events, I arrive on the doorstep of Larry Flynt’s Hustler Club, tired, disenchanted, and wet from New York’s own insipid drooling. Three men in black suits huddle under the awning, blurred into an image of Cerberus by the rain. “Is it great in there?” I ask in a tone — at once belligerent and ironic — that I’ve manufactured especially for all the doormen, and their raised eyebrows, that I’ve encountered since becoming a familiar of the New York night.

I let them tell me “finest girls in the city,” and I wish I could take their answer as sincere, on any level. After all, of the city’s nightclubs, Hustler is The Biggest, The Most Iconic — and not the least expensive: Twenty-eight dollar cover for a weeknight, early. Five dollar mandatory coat check. Twelve dollar mandatory drink, with three dollar mandatory gratuity. Thus divested of my drippy outerwear and dead presidents, I walk past tinted glass and entered the inner sanctum of 51<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> avenue. I sit sodden in a plush chair at the back, while dark Manhattan rolls over to show me its (not so secret) underbelly.

Looking at the women around me, I begin to see the old clichés come alive. From those who wander over to talk, I hear it. Women with mascara crusted into their crows-feet. A mom of two who’d been rasping against a regular’s leg while inquiring about his wife. Girls with naughty fathers and without their shirts, wearing pigtails.



Varying reports put childhood abuse among dancers at forty to eighty percent. Accounts of single-parent childhoods (or situations in which the dancer felt her mother was made to choose between her and a boyfriend) are similarly common. By the time I've started to steam dry, I am believing that every woman in the club has been hit, raised a ward of the state, impregnated by a relative, and is trying to earn a degree and a "better life." And where, in wet boots, a turtleneck and slacks, clutching a notebook, does that leave me?

In many clubs, women are admitted as customers only when accompanied by a man — the commonly held belief being that this rule was created to prohibit lesbians and prostitutes from entering. A candid manager, however, revealed that in truth this policy prevents jealous wives and girlfriends from storming in and physically attacking dancers or customers. Indeed, higher-end clubs employ a number of practices catering to the privacy and security of their clients, including sound-proof phone-booths to call work or home without revealing one's whereabouts. Looking around at guys whose bodies, even when pinned under the hold of a half-naked girl, are arranged into carefully constructed illustrations of indifference (slouch *à la* Superbowl) I conclude that I am, undoubtedly, in a space that is assembled, ironically enough, to ignore the female presence.

How far are we (a hundred years? less?) from the time when sexuality in women was considered aberrant, an illness for which doctors prescribed borax douches and bloodletting? Today, are we still suspicious of women sexually to the point where we must classify those who perform with their bodies as either victims of class and race, bravely working to better their circumstances, or otherwise, disempowered housewives trying to awaken from the deep sleep of suburban oppression? The shame of entertaining is implicit in our sexual code, and is reinforced through much of the discourse — whether it's the USPDF's assertion that pole dancing is *not* stripping, or the legitimization of women stripping only through the ultimate goal of attaining some more appropriate "female" role: supporting one's children, in the case of many dancing professionally. Or "freeing up" and feeling sexier for a husband or boyfriend, in the case of those not inclined to go public. Or, of course, exercising to achieve a more sexually idealized body.

Without economics or self-esteem as an excuse, I am left out. In California, sultry brown dress notwithstanding, I had entered as a man — free to look and be looked at without having to choose between whore and Madonna. Now, alone, I have to be careful entering a place where *those* types of women go: my clothes quite consciously signal that my body is *not* available, and I realize I've been holding my notebook conspicuously in front of me, like a shield. *I am not one of these ladies, I'm subconsciously saying. Nor am I ogling them. I'm innocent! I'm neutral! I'm taking notes!*

Suddenly, I'm startled.

"I genuinely like it, you know." A tired-looking girl in fluorescent orange panties sits down next to me. "I truly like dancing," she says, unsolicited, pointing to my notebook. "I just wish, sometimes, that it were kinder."

As she says this, she adjusts on her seat, realizing that she's perched her nearly-naked nether-regions on a damp cushion, soaked with the remnants of a spilled beer. Before I can reply, she's gotten up and moved on.



Back at Pole Control, Lela is showing me pictures from her years as a dancer. She leafs through pages of an album that she has covered with thick embossed leather, and adorned with ornate clasps fashioned by bending buckles cut from a dime-store belt. The DIY album is the minutest detail of a studio that Lela has crafted entirely on her own, renovating the drywall box into a luxurious hideaway. I'm having a hard time digesting the fact that the artsy-craftsy girl flipping the album's pages is the same one featured therein — in fifty consecutive snapshots that conjure up the *Kama Sutra*.

When I was introduced to Pole Control as a safe place for women *and* their body images, I had assumed I would find a spot somewhat devoid of sensuality. I couldn't have misunderstood more thoroughly. Lela and I are on a stuffed suede chaise, in a lounge whose dark plum walls are covered with black-filigree framed pinups, carefully alternated with small ornate cameos. Mirrors are everywhere, bordered in silver and gold. Rich curtains froth from the windows, mellowing the sunlight. Through a door, I can see a brocade draped massage table, shelves of oils, and burning candles. Two live turtles swim in a small tank with a waterfall. Inside a dimly lit powder room, silk drapes suggest private changing areas. There is a basin sink and a dark mahogany armoire surrounded by vases of flowers. Two heavy velvet robes hang on hooks. The room drips boudoir.

Lela studied fashion in college, and when she needed extra money to support herself, selling her designs seemed like a natural choice. It wasn't long before she discovered a huge market for her intricate corsets and delicate lace among the exotic dancers that frequented her city's nightclubs. "I would be hanging around the club after hours, and all these girls would be oohing and ahing and fighting over my clothes. But I was oohing and ahing over these brass poles in the corner. Like they were just calling out to me!"

Lela learned the trade, and played her part by putting herself through school. Since opening Pole Control, she hasn't danced professionally, though she's still sought after by club owners for her

skill. With websites and books dedicated to teaching, and portable poles like the *Lil' Manx* available online, the art form is quickly becoming naturalized as sport. Last March, the USPDF sponsored the first ever United States Pole Dancing Championship, a show of mind-boggling energy and athletic prowess. What's more, according to USPDF cofounders Anna Grundstrom and Wendy Traskos, who invented the competition's strict guidelines (no minors, no vulgarity, no g-strings) and formal scoring system, the first event's audience was composed almost entirely of women. There is even a proposal to include "vertical dance" in the Olympics — and Lela says she would be happy to compete. But her proudest achievement is her studio. "People can buy memberships, because it's meant to be a different *kind* of club: a respite for women — of all types."

I examine the framed pinup girls — cut from old magazines of her grandfather's, I learn. At my left shoulder, a sumptuous blonde purses her strawberry lips, revealing just a hint of garter and black lace as she tips a glass jar of water into a 1950's style cooler. Above my head, cradling a kitten, a honey-colored woman beckons from the lit-up front door of a house in the night.

"These women are sexy without barely trying," Lela motions around the room. "I want all women to embrace that." She softens.

"My grandmother cried when she saw this place. My grandpa died just before it opened. He would have loved it."

I consider for a moment, realizing *most* men would love it. It's not far off from that vision of the dark, opulent hideaways above restaurants or beneath casinos, where the pinstriped individuals of our imagination drink scotch and conduct business behind veils of cigar-scented smoke. Something of that seduction, that slightly illicit sexuality, hangs in the air at Pole Control. But unlike these imagined speakeasies, where men can shake on business deals with a scantily clad woman parked at each elbow, or the gaudy clubs of present-day New York, Lela's lounge does not pander to its users with some stale, gendered fantasy about who may indulge in what. Here, a wisp of the Moulin Rouge mingles with the mystique of the Victorian circuses where, Lela tells me, girls used to dance on the tent poles.

Cloaked in such poetry, the art of dancing offers something that everyone wants. Being desired, yes. Feeling powerful, certainly. But something else, as well. A freedom and abandon and joy that isn't connected to Power or Money or (maybe) even Sex.

Maybe that something is now trapped. Trapped under all the shirts and stockings and buckles and belts, the books and bags we carry around full of Freud and *Cosmo* and Betty Friedan, Eve Ensler and even, Good Lord, *The Bible*. Maybe we just need to lose it all. Shed it. Strip it off. Maybe, under all the clothing, there is the simple wonder of the body's sensuality. H.L. Menken is said to have coined a

term—ecdysiast—for a stripteaser who wanted a more elegant way to refer to her occupation.

Ecdysiast, from *ecdysis*. Latin, meaning “to molt.”

Suddenly, I can begin to understand the woman in orange. I never wanted to be a ballerina as a little girl, but I can see myself experiencing the dancing dream now, in some twisted way, like those few adults who get killer shingles because they never had the chicken pox as children. I had the feeling once before, in a club in California, watching ethereal women weaving gossamer webs in the air. That night, far from worrying about who was looking or being looked at, I shared a thrill with the woman on stage. When she had finished, I remember, she leaned down to collect her scattered money. She stuffed the wad of cash into the side of her black lace undies, looked straight at me, and winked at me. When I dug a few bills out of my purse, she took them and added them to the bunch. Nothing to consider.

Objectification? Maybe. Some women would certainly say so. But maybe all of those women hollering just have *their* panties in a wad, instead of the other way around.

As for *my* dancing days? I wonder, reclining into Lela’s chaise lounge. I’ve had fun. Maybe I’ll keep coming to classes. And even if I don’t, I really do feel empowered. I mean, I may not ever be a ballerina, but (I look down at my hands rubbed raw from practice) I can frickin’ do one on a pole.