Scance
My Descendants

by Melissa McCarthy

In 2012 the professional daredevil Felix Baumgartner jumped out of a small, silvered capsule and fell down to the earth. He had been lifted by helium balloon up into the stratosphere, to 128,000 feet, or just over twenty-four miles high. He was the focal figure of a lavish project whose aim was to break some records pertaining to flight and falling. (Though, as the opening intoning of Kassovitz's 1995 film *La Haine* implies, it's all flight until you hit the ground.) Baumgartner's team cracked some: jumping from the highest starting point; freefalling in a pressure suit furthest and fastest; first person to break the sound barrier without engine power. It looks like he missed out on: longest time in freefall, and, highest balloon flight. But the numbers and records are to me the least interesting thing about the project—he was always attending to the basic physics equations of distance, time, speed. Instead, I like the Baumgartner project because of the thoughts it prompts about pregnancy, birth and parenthood.

It reminded me of events from a few years earlier, when I'd been pregnant with my second daughter. The local midwifery team had sent us up to a hospital with a preeminent ante- and neo-natal unit. In the waiting rooms there were abandoned polystyrene cups, a malfunctioning drinks vending machine, and weird site-specific tv showing on high-mounted monitors: a bit grim, like every medical waiting room. But when they called us through, I'd never felt myself in such reassuringly competent hands before. It seemed like people with names and accents from the whole world had gathered there, applying unsurpassable skill and attention, to keep my baby safe. And it's true, the hospital draws in medics from all over the world; they gravitate there to the mass of its expertise, like the earth pulls the moon. Everyone deferred to a magnificent Scottish consultant, an elegant woman with a diamond ring collection that could serve double-shift as a knuckleduster. (It's not entirely unrelated that we now live in Scotland.)

They put cold gel on my waxing large stomach and looked at the monitor, where shapes of the baby's organs appeared out of white shadows and faded back again behind mounds and craters, outcrops. Then they got onto the job of measuring: checking that the heart was not too big, and trying to pinpoint the start and end of a line up the back of the baby's neck. It was part of a procedure grounded in statistics, predicting the likelihood of the baby's having Down's syndrome. While the scanner moved over me, we all looked at the monitor screen. It was a multi-part image, with boxes round the edges of the screen in white and green text: patient details, numbers. The figures changed quickly, scrolling along, as the sonographer moved the device over me. She had a serious face, then the image unglitched.

'At first I could not see the baby,' she explained, in her Central European accent. 'The image was too bright; I was… embezzled by the baby's beauty!' she reassured us, and I tumbled into a lifelong devotion to the staff at King's College Hospital. Up came co-ordinates, distances between points on the baby. How many weeks, expected due date, my age. It was time and distance, again. There was a pulse bumping along somewhere on the screen, for speed of my heartbeat, the baby's. This is how the scan works: bouncing the waves off the more solid parts, seeing how quickly they return to their transmission point.

At zero minutes, Baumgartner's radio loop transmits him saying, 'I'm going home now,' and he tumbles forwards off the step into the darkness. After four minutes nineteen seconds his parachute opens. He's no longer just falling down, in his space suit. But he was never unconnected, to the team guiding his mission, down in a ground control in Roswell, New Mexico. Surrounded by their polystyrene cups, there are rows of ground technicians, each with a name and job description sign, and a screen to watch. Baumgartner's family are there, sitting along the side, but the central character is the guy, front and central desk, who talks him through the jump, counting down each step of the procedure, firmly nudging him to the moment. It looks like Baumgartner feels, understandably, a little reluctant, the last few steps before leaving the capsule. The guy repeats a couple of instructions, patiently, encouragingly. 'Stow umbilical' he says, 'Stow umbilical!', which sounds like the name of an Edwardian sports team, attached to a laying-in hospital. The voice belongs to an older man, light grey hair and a round, squashy sort of figure. He's Joe Kittinger, who for the previous forty years has himself held the record for the most extreme jumps, dating back to when he was an experimentally-minded member of the US air force. He has a completely paternal role in Baumgartner's jump, handing on his baton to the next generation. (I can't help checking to see how Joe Kittinger's dates—born July 1928—compare with those of the great maternity advocate Sheila Kitzinger, born March 1929.)

The duration of the jump, like my scan, is presented and mediated by a range of screens. Baumgartner is multi-camera'd. He has a suit-mounted camera, so we can see what he sees as he spins and falls. There's a second perspective, a monitor view, like what one of the ground team will be looking at, so that we as audience see the square of a screen filled with the blackness of space, against which his tiny white shape falls. Then there's a third view, presented by an airborne camera in the lower atmosphere, showing him under his bright parachute against the blue sky. There's another camera stationed at ground control, pointing at the teams seated at their monitors, to show us the reactions the fall is causing. The jump, deferred.

As well as these different views, recordings of the event offer us overlapping, interfering audio tracks: Baumgartner's fuzzy, almost illegible voice over his channels; Kittinger's clear, hearty tones, heard from both ends: as he speaks them, and doubled through Baumgartner's earpiece: 'Floating by safely down to Earth,' he says, with relief. There's the tech director, talking through the landing: 'Wind's out of the east'; someone in the filming helicopter; 'Mike Todd on this frequency, give Mike Todd a call,' on local radio. It's a mash-up technique that was also used, and to my mind, perfected by British documentary filmmaker Mike Grigsby, whose work on pivotal moments of the twentieth century, and on particular points of trauma, is much underrated. They're all talking, and all interpreting lines of speech to each other. 'Drop smoke,' says the tech guy, then Kittinger explains, ostensibly to Baumgartner, more likely to the non-tech audience, what this means: they're dropping a smoke marker from the helicopter, to make a mark showing him where to land. Then a control room commentator, describing and synthesizing the whole event, comes in querying the 'Mach', or speed of the descent. He pronounces it long-vowelled, as 'mark'. Everyone's words cut up.

When we follow for a minute the monitor view of Baumgartner, he grows. At first there's a black screen, then a white dot careening around it, as the camera tries to fix and centre the figure. Then it cell-divides and duplicates, and the dot stabilises as a longer shape, with a top half and a bottom, curved round like a tiny embryo. Later, as the background has lightened to grey instead of the black of far away, the figure develops appendages, a more complex shape at the top, connected by thin cords and membranes. Then the video's p.o.v. switches to the aerial camera, and we see the parachute floating, Baumgartner's little legs dangling like he's sitting in a baby bouncer. 'Felix, we're so proud of you,' announces his dad, I mean, Kittinger. In his spacesuit he's as helpless and ungainly as a toddler, with his big, round, space head.

Baumgartner's jump seems to me to be important because it provides an artifact, an artwork, I'd go so far as to say, about paternity, coming-into-being, about birth through media.

Forget the sentiment-bludgeoning Bill Viola; go to YouTube for the BBC, National Geographic and Red Bull videos.

From my own mission control, (as I sit at my desk, no name tag, proper coffee cup rather than polystyrene), the two surfaces I toggle between are the videos of Baumgartner's jump, on my computer; and a book. This, the other lens through which I find it interesting to consider the jump, is a work of George Perec, French writer, born 1936. Among his dazzling manipulations of language, and his investigations of memory and the catastrophes of history and family, there's one simple piece that I find my line snagging on, again and again. It's 'The Parachute Jump', from *Je suis ne*, published in French in 1990 and in English translation (by J. Sturrock) in 1997, in which he describes his feelings when as a conscript in the army he had to learn how to jump out of planes.

It's a text of a few pages, and it's not a straight written work but a transcript, of Perec, after a few drinks, in Paris in 1959, speaking at an editorial meeting of the journal *Arguments*. That's what the translator Sturrock explains in the Penguin edition, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces,* and I suppose this is right. But one pleasure about reading Perec is that you can't feel sure; to read Perec is to step out into the free-fall of what literature might convey. Someone who can build an apartment block out of words (*La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978) / *Life: a User's Manual*) or can write a book out of absence, of extraction from the alphabet (*La Disparition* (1969) / *A Void*) is someone who's at home in the artifice of language. It's his material, more explicitly and referentially than for most other writers. Yes, this parachute piece was a digression at the end of an editorial piss-up, as though someone's just happened to press 'play' on the tape recorder. But now that Perec's dead (in 1982), or perhaps ever since it's written, there's no difference between this piece, as I read it in my peppermint-spined volume, and any other deliberate writing, polished and perfected. Now they are equal, published texts, and Perec's facility and skill with language is such that even a transcript starts to look effortless, a sprezzatura. I always like a piece that starts with ellipsis and ends with, 'That's all.'

One thing: Sturrock footnotes that 'his is the transcript of remarks […]' and I am taken by the word 'remark', as noun and verb. To remark is a casual way of speaking: short, inexhaustive, in passing. But not unimportant: we find 'remarkable' as exclamation noting amazement, achievement, what an elderly British colonel might say as he peers over his glasses. Not a colonel of the other sort, supervising Perec's training for incursions into Algeria. Then, 'remark' contains duplication, the 're' of something happening a second time. Remark is to mark again, to land on the same spot, revisit. I think of cricket, the batter knocking the bat onto the ground a couple of times, asking the umpire to confirm: if my bat is placed here, is it directly

straight with these stumps that I'm trying to defend? The umpire, far away at the other end, has a longer line of sight and can confirm. The batsman taps against the ground with the extension of their body, denting a little notch, a tiny scrape, into the earth. Re-marking, getting the right space, with the help of vision and distance. I also like that 'remark' suggests the importance of noticing as a form of creating. Everything is already there, flowing unformedly past, one time, but it's the remarking on it, the dwelling a second time, that brings a place, an item, a thought or image into proper existence.

So what are Perec's remarks? Even off-the-cuff, he has a gift for rhetoric. His speech is basically an extended zeugma, yoking together his experience of how a parachute jump effected personal transformation on him, with a recommendation that the editors of *Arguments* take the plunge and get on with it. With something—publication, transformation, a deadline—it's not entirely clear what. He's telling a story about jumping, to exhort the others to be bold.

Here's how he describes it:

> A wait, extremely slow. […] there's a whole lot of people going ahead of us […] risking something before we do—and as for us, we're not feeling as brave as we should. We're busy waiting simply; you smoke a cigarette, you go and pee […] it's something very heavy and very laborious to carry. You are well and truly… condemned […] You can't carry it, can't walk with it. You're forced to put up with it.

Then into the plane, airborne, ready to jump.

> And as you move forwards, you gradually lose your awareness of yourself. The one thing left is your determination, the determination to get all this inertia over with, all this heaviness […] you're all in a hurry, in a huge hurry to get out.

'I'm inclined to make comparisons that are always a little peculiar,' says Perec, exhorting his buddies to get on with their journalism. But his comparison is stranger than he knows; I can't help hearing in his language another parallel, an echo of experiences around birth, pregnancy and labour (it does appear in a collection named Je suis ne, or, I was born). But these states—bulkiness, needing to pee, inertia, fear, hurry, something unstoppable commencing—are utterly recognizable. He's talking about a military airfield, not a maternity hospital, but you wouldn't know; the imagery and emotions are the same.

And Perec's description is not just about the run-up to the event; it's about how it transforms the perpetrator. To jump is an optimism, a 'trusting in life', and since he's done it, he is a different person, with self-acceptance, the ability to 'define' himself, the understanding that 'it

was necessary to throw yourself out in order to be convinced that it might have a meaning.' His uncontrollable worries have slipped away and he is basically at peace, in the world and in himself. I couldn't speak for other women, but I would remark that, by chance or otherwise, this is exactly how I felt after my baby was born. Anything that had troubled me before slipped away, and, despite some surface problems, turbulences, I felt underlyingly calm and happy at all times. Ever since.

There are overlaps between Perec's and Baumgartner's jump, as well, though they have very different circumstances. They are both military-derived. They share the presence of a father-figure, behind the scenes. Baumgartner has Kittinger; Perec mentions that he could have escaped military service, with Sturrock footnoting that this is on the grounds of Perec's father's death in action in 1940. There's a parental parenthesis to everything. There's the compulsion, the inexorable nature of both jumps. Perec describes the inevitability, while Baumgartner shows it, shows the relentless following of one thing after another. If you step out, up near space, you'll fall to earth. Whatever your technological support, the screens and vision, the machinery, the baby will come when she's ready.

And there's one detail among this parachuting, in all the fall, which took my attention in the first place. It's Baumgartner's shadow, when he's in the very home stretch—out of danger, visor un-fogged, no longer spinning furiously, lines of communication all functioning. Just as he comes near, and the space where he'll land is apparent, the audience can see him through the camera in the nearby helicopter. For the final spell, the shadow of him and his parachute are clear against the scrubby ground. We can see the rectangle of the chute, the sticks of legs, as darkness against the yellowy dust. That's where Baumgartner's rapidly approaching. Not floating any more but palpably falling fast. Of course it is, there can be no other ending than that his real legs will land exactly on the spot where his shadow legs are waiting. There's no time to think about it, as he's plummeting on down, as speed cuts the distance, as his shadow self rushes up to meet him.

But this was what drew me in, to parachuting, to birth as flight: the parachutist, himself someone's child, choosing to fall in a way that can't be stopped, towards something of the same shape, which grows bigger throughout. Perec says of his jump that 'I was going to have to put my trust in things that were wholly alien to me. That I was going to have to begin assuming my situation fully, definitively.' That's how I saw my daughter's birth, through all the distance then speed: meeting the inescapable shadow that has been with me all along. I'll have to put my trust, assume my situation fully. To meet the figure who was there all the time: my descendant. That's all.