

An Open Letter to Debbie Brill

by Angela Hryniuk

Cette lettre ouverte nous fait part des années compétitives de saut en hauteur de l'auteure tandis qu'elle grandissait au sein d'une famille dysfonctionnelle.

Dear Debbie,

In 1986, when your book *Jump* was published it had only been six years since I had hung up my highjumping shoes. You know, the mismatched pair jumpers always wear, a blue suede Adidas heel spike on my right foot and a white Nike on my left. Six years wasn't long enough to distance myself from my athletics—the blood still sticky



Angela Hryniuk, 1979

Photo: Michael Parsons

on my heart from high jumping on tartan tracks, in high school gyms, and small town arenas. I've just finished your book *Jump*. It's taken me almost nine years to get down to hearing about your ups.

I read about you today and slide back into that mental competitive head space of being alone in a crowd of thousands. Mine were more in the hundreds in the Knights of Columbus arena of Brandon, the Kinsmen arena of Saskatoon, the stands of the Pan Am stadium at the University of Manitoba.

Above all, it's a psychological challenge. The height of the bar is fixed, the performance level required for progress is known down to the last inch... (Brill 123)

We shared the emptying out of the world of sound, of motion, of emotion with one goal in mind—to leap over a metal bar. A bar that forced us to arch our backs and left scars reminding us when we didn't. That bar. What a great teacher.

In the winter of '82 you set an indoor world record of 1.99m (6' 7.25"). Me, I didn't clear a bar beyond 1.62m (5'3.25") but I was 16. I watched you from afar, from the Prairies. You, a decade older, setting records I aspired to break. At 15 I had jumped higher than one of the world's best. If I had continued, would I have jumped against you? My coach gave me a chart of the heights your rivals Sara Simeoni and Rosemary Ackermann had cleared and the ages they reached them. At the age of 26, when they jumped 1.97m (6'6.75") and 1.98m (6'7") respectively I had had an abortion, and my first book, about healing from sexual abuse, was published.

I realize how tough I'd been as a teenage competitor, how thoroughly I'd rejected the idea of losing. It had all been so natural then, before I ran into the disillusionment... (Brill 138)

The winter of '79 I pulled my right achilles tendon, my jumping foot. Little red pills, and physiotherapy three times a week reduced the swelling and accelerated the healing. That entire winter I soaked my ankle in a turkey roaster filled with ice in our kitchen. The echo of that ache so specific to the achilles, I feel it even today.

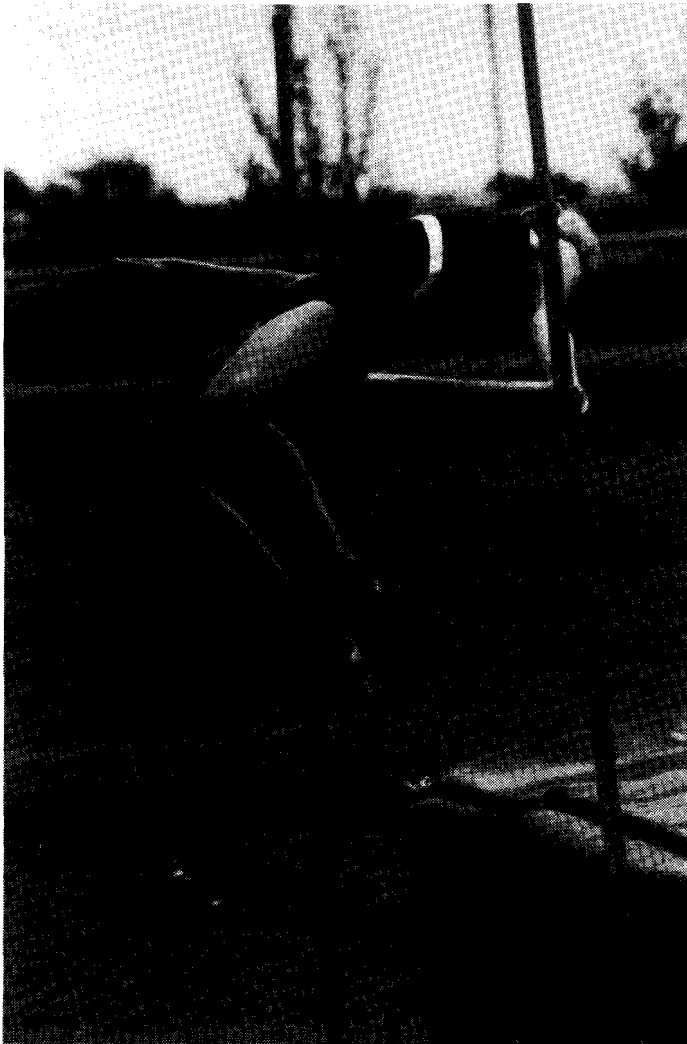
That summer my track club, Flying 'M', travelled to England to compete in a series of meets. It was my first meet in London. During the warm-up, I attempted a practice height higher than I should have. The plant was very heavy and I could feel my ankle sink into my heel. Then my ankle twisted and on take-off I could hear the ripping. I jumped nonetheless. At 16, I psychologically retired my lust for winning.

So much anguish and nurturance wrapped up in the old sweats stuffed at the back of my closet. I started running in the evenings at River Heights Junior High with older kids, and the Flying 'M' Athletes when I was just ten. It was then that my parents began their silent treatment of each other.

[Brill] had finally flown like a bird from the cage of a troubled psyche. (Brill 127)

Yes, my psyche, too, wanted to venture beyond the constraints of my family, my upbringing, and the loneliness. At eleven my parents separated, and my coach truly became my father and mother. I was 12 when I learned to jump. I grew up with a single mother who was a nurse in a prison by night and by day attended university. I look at a photo of me from then, my eyes glassy and impenetrable. The eyes of a young war refugee who has seen too much too soon.

It is that space and time of actually jumping which we individually experienced that you and I share. Seeing the



Angela Hryniuk, 1979

Photo: Michael Parsons

same competitors meet after meet, from different provinces, cities, one meet they win, the next you do. Although, I always competed against myself first, there was the psych-out of the warm-up. There was the exhilaration when your machine and mind are in synch. And humiliation when they're not.

...it had all been so natural then, before I ran into the disillusionment, the sense that there was something inherently wrong, not in the challenge of trying to be the best I could, but in that emphasis on the line between winning and losing. (Brill 138)

You speak of writing after you retire as an athlete. In writing, as in jumping you face only yourself. And, you wear two distinct shoes, once again. The specialized and expensive one to execute a good plant and take-off; the other ordinary. The performance has wider ramifications, but initially it is self-revelatory and empowering. First we jump. Then we write. Training daily, seeing peers at the track, daily, daily my discipline for today was shaped then. The infield and highjump pit were good practice grounds for today's race. Without track I wouldn't be the writer I am. Even then I knew there was more than just the winning. And the losing.

As you say, "at some point you know you're going to miss three jumps, and it's all going to be over" (Brill 123). My memory won't recall where I was jumping when I took my final three attempts.

...the good side of sport, the part that is private and deep; ...the kinds of satisfaction that are so intimate they are covered up, unspoken. (Brill 45)

The sacredness of jumping. That private, quiet space where you are alone with your soul. When you execute a perfect jump: a smooth run-up, a solid plant, a take-off which would send you to the moon if the sky wasn't there. Where you soar over the bar, hips hanging just long enough for your legs to whip up and over your shoulders. Ah, flying.

Debbie Brill, athlete, woman, thank-you for being the best. Thank-you for giving a young girl in Winnipeg a window of possibility. To learn to jump for joy.

All the best in your writing. Angela Hryniuk.

Angela Hryniuk is the author of No Visual Scars (Polestar Press, 1993) and Walking Inside Circles (Ragweed Press, 1989). She recently moved from Vancouver to Salt Spring Island. During the 1970s, she competed nationally in high-jump and the pentathlon. She tries to keep in shape now.

References

Brill, Debbie and J. Lawton. *Jump*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1986.