

Searching for Pridamant

AMY YOURD

When I was fifteen, I was given the role of a lifetime as Pridamant, the tragic antagonist of Tony Kushner's *The Illusion*. Fueled by passion for storytelling and a dream of becoming an actor, I threw myself into the role. A cold, emotionless, and critically ill old woman, Pridamant was the very antithesis of myself, yet I felt a strange kinship with her. As the opening neared, we began to grow together. We shared the same hopes, dreams, and fears. We looked identical. We possessed complementary opinions and similar wardrobes. I felt as though a part of myself had been transplanted into Kushner's fictional character, creating something greater than a figment of language. I felt as though part of me was becoming her.

For months after the show was over, I carried Pridamant around like a shadow—a twin soul who kept me in check, gave me perspective, and understood my fifteen-year-old's anxieties. Pridamant was my cautionary tale, I her protégé. I wanted desperately to redeem the crimes of her past, and for her to protect me from the trials of my future. In my overactive imagination, we became two living, breathing organisms with a shared nervous system, two hearts pumping the same blood, two brains thinking the same thoughts.

Then, gradually, either from time or overuse, Pridamant began to fade away. I began to expect the same connection with every character I played and I soon became terrified at the thought of stepping onstage. A piece of myself had faded away; my alter-ego had abandoned me to my insecurities. This was over a year ago.

Despite my crippling stage fright, I chose to keep pursuing my theatrical dreams and enrolled in directing school. As a newcomer to New York City, I would often go out by myself and realize how much I detested being alone. Ever the earnest storyteller, I tried to create new characters for myself to inhabit, men and women I could slip into as easily as I had inhabited Pridamant. I imagined secondary characters—mentors, lovers, parents, friends—accompanying me on my trips around the city.

Now, I'm older, slightly older, and significantly less willing to step into crafted realities and imaginary companions. My heart's singular beat is loud in my ears. The city seems to be full of people, people whom I imagine to be complete. Yet I still recall my cold loneliness, and my heart tells me I'm not the only one. Perhaps this dream, this embrace of imaginary completeness, is a widespread phenomenon rather than the inevitable byproduct of an art student's loneliness. I feel a great deal of shame and terror when I revisit my memories of Pridamant now. It is not her absence that frightens me, but the degree to which I knew her, loved her, needed her. *It is not normal*, I think, *to submerge yourself in fantasy*. Not completely.

Yet it may be the submersion we seek out, and the submersion we need. As I cross the threshold and enter the resonant atrium of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I forget my grumbles. I feel the familiar yet exhilarating pull of worlds unexplored, experiences unhad, art unseen. In a museum, a theater, a concert hall, I can lose myself entirely in the embrace of someone else's creation. The responsibility lies with someone else. I am simply along for the ride. This time, I head for my favorite section, Modern Painting and Sculpture. I scale the large staircase, jaunt through Eighteenth Century Europe, and pass through the archway to the Modern wing. In a small atrium off the main hallway, I pause to catch my breath, taking a moment to contemplate Damien Hirst's infamous formaldehyde shark. Then I turn and stop in my tracks.

The mirror is sharp and imposing, at once familiar and hauntingly alien. Through its glass, I can see the world as I know it, but in phrases, fragments, or distorted half-thoughts. It reflects reality in miniature and on the most ambitious scale. The sculpture, Anish Kapoor's 2007 *Untitled*, rests in a corner, hexagonal and jagged, more closely resembling a honeycomb or a kaleidoscope than a reflection of the world we live in—or the world I'd thought I lived in until that moment. The mirror is actually a conglomeration of several hundred tiny hexagons, each about two inches wide, fitted closely together to create one amorphous, impossible array. Each mirror is placed at a slightly different angle from its sister's so that the image we see is never quite the same.

Standing directly before the piece, I can see fragments of my face reflected thousands of times. Instead of the flat version of myself I am used to seeing, the mirror's hexagonal patchwork cuts me apart, slices me open, and distributes the pieces without stopping to think where they should go. An eye here, a finger there, six hundred mouths giving the same shocked expression. My face becomes an infinite variety. Standing back, I see that these fragments

fuse like pieces of a photo collage to create a greater image, a pixelated shadow of my shape. Up close, my features are intimately specific; from afar, they are fading away.

The mirror, more than any mirror, seems to reflect my interactions with the rest of the world. Like many New Yorkers, I cannot pass a store window without sneaking a glance to check my reflection. Like Narcissus, my self-observation consumes me. I imagine my own image seeping into every piece of work I make, every word I say. I spend my days inventing invisible companions, my nights dreaming of invisible men—and I do this out of loneliness or pathological self-obsession. Half my conversations are so disconnected they could read as two separate scenes; neither one of us really cares what the other has to say. And I know that unless I can free myself from this solipsistic captivity, my world will remain empty and lifeless. I strain, staring myself in the eye, looking for something in the past or the future that will set me free.

I find things easier to fall in love with than people. Songs, paintings, plays, and even television characters make my heart flutter with unfiltered yearning, but other human beings leave me mumbling and shuffling, shyly ducking out of conversations. Chopin! Chekhov! Matisse! I have no trouble giving myself over to their lasting, inviting dialogue. But the boy who sits beside me on the bus—oh my . . .

I desire romantic union, but only so long as the romance is pristine, playing out on an imaginary plane. My classmate Jerome, so harmless in my mind's eye, returns my actual gaze and threatens my very core. The imaginary is so much less frighteningly real.

I love Doctor Who without reservation. Quarantined in my mind, he is the perfect companion: handsome, heroic, unnaturally talented, and utterly unattainable. He always avoids romantic entanglement with his beautiful female companions and seems to possess no sexual desire. This is not a problem, though, because what I need from the Doctor has never been something real.

I imagine the Doctor beside me. I feel him getting onto buses, piling out of elevators, or walking beside me as I explore the quiet backstreets of the city at night. He is a phantom, infinitely less real than the memory of a long lost friend or lover, yet somehow he follows me around, a reflection of a dream who refuses to leave. And he is not Pridamant. He does not complete me. However much I thirst for him, the fictional Doctor is incapable of filling the empty space within me; I can imagine his presence, but he remains someone else's creation rented by a lonely mind.

This diet of dreams and false prophets drives me mad sometimes. I start talking to attractive men in photographs. I glare at couples kissing on the subway. I am overwhelmed with the desire to wash a man's hair. This particular impulse unsettles me—for whatever reason, that unknown sensation, the texture of someone else's scalp beneath my fingertips, seems to be unspeakably intimate and romantic. The interaction of the hands upon the temples—two densely packed nerve centers—haunts me as an unattainable ideal. It feels like a creepy fetish, yet it seems entirely natural.

In an attempt to curb my growing desperation, I enrolled in a class on Love. Sure enough, it was full of exhausted, terrified, desperately lonely theater students.

"Today, we're going to speak about the Ocean of Souls," said our professor, a sort of mystical guru named Rubén. "The Ocean of Souls is an old Hindu Creation myth that speaks to the interconnectivity within humanity."

According to the myth, every living soul comes from a greater spiritual place called the Ocean of Souls. A single drop from the Ocean of Souls falls to the Earth, takes physical form, and becomes a living thing. At the end of the organism's physical life, the soul returns to the Ocean to repeat the cycle again.

"However," he said, eyes twinkling with delight, "these souls will never complete the cycle the same way twice. In life, the soul is changed by its experiences, its relationships, its interactions with the world around it."

"Does this mean that one of the pieces of my soul could be the same as a piece of yours?" a classmate asked.

"According to the myth, interactions with other people are physical manifestations of the pieces of our souls. The pieces of ourselves that came from the same original source will attract, allowing people with souls of similar makeup to gravitate towards each other."

Perhaps I just haven't discovered any twin pieces of myself yet.

But perhaps I have. Perhaps I come across these pieces of myself every day. Just as Pridamant seemed to own a piece of my soul, pieces of it must be scattered about every inch of this crowded city, this crowded planet. Through the glass of the mirror, I can see reflected the whole of the museum around me. To the left, Hirst's shark growls in hundreds of forms, its tank reflecting and re-reflecting the pieces in the mirror. Through the glass of the tank, I can make out the skeletal trees of Central Park, the gathering clouds, the piercing blue of the wintery morning sky. Through the hallway behind me, something catches my eye—a familiar Matisse, hidden rooms away. The mirror has

captured it at just the right angle to reflect it back in miniature—a copy of a painting, like a transmission from a different world.

The mirror suggests to me that seeing is not all that takes place between me and the art objects I encounter. A discourse takes place, an invisible union, a love beyond solipsism. I find a painting, a song, a photograph, and these small things seem to communicate with me like alien lovers. The inanimate becomes as powerful as if it were flesh and bone, without the uncomfortable addition of being human. Perhaps the creation of art, our interaction with art, is also the splitting of the soul, the pouring of it into a foreign vessel. I see a piece of me reflected through the eyes of that Matisse. I see a piece of me within something I can neither contain nor understand. The melody within my soul is, perhaps, the song I wrote with Chopin. But I wouldn't be able to sing it back to you.

I try nevertheless. From our movement exercises in drama classes to the loudest of monologues, we try our hardest to speak to someone who wants, desperately, to listen. My classmates and I construct a scene from Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* with the utmost care. Our Astrov, the bitter and hardened country doctor, cannot merely be human: he must be a mirror, an Astrov for the world. He must be a collective attempt to craft a human soul, a discourse between writer, actor, director—Chekhov, Jerome, and me.

And even as I work, fueled by camaraderie, I realize that these connections are everywhere—in places I had looked but not seen, people I had seen but not known.

Thoughtlessly doodling in my notebook, I look down, and the symbol I've drawn says more than words can muster. It is a small design that looks like two faces smashed together. Separated by only a thin line between their profiles, they are one-eyed, half-mouthed creatures made complete by a kiss. And it is an optical illusion. If you look closely, the two pieces become a single complete face. One from two.

Somewhere in the world, I will likely find another person whose soul complements and completes mine—someone as elegant as Astrov, as caring as Pridamant, as adept, handsome, and passionate as the Doctor. But we will have to be in dialogue, and I will not be able to create him to my own liking. Only a separate presence can fill the other half of my soul—only another heart, in another body, beating alongside mine.

There's a reason why Doctor Who can be alone: his genetic makeup dictates it. The Doctor has a binary vascular system—two hearts. He is his own missing piece, his own soul mate, biologically and existentially complete. One of the show's running musical motifs is the repetition of a drumbeat—four

vibrations, the pattern of two hearts beating side by side. He reminds me of Frida Kahlo's double-portrait, *The Two Fridas*, in which two versions of the painter sit side by side in an empty field. They are holding hands, but that is not all that joins them; the heart of each Frida is exposed, blood red, pulsing with life—and deeply intertwined with the other.

What a pleasure it would be to grow a second heart! To complete myself, as no one can complete it for me. I imagine that second beat inside myself, correcting the unsteady beat of its twin. I imagine it assembled from pieces of my soul—the piece that belongs to the Doctor, to Frida Kahlo, to Astrov, to Pridamant. The sensation is gone before I know it, but I know it will return.

Jerome has cake in his hair—another sad casualty of theater class gone awry. The image tears at my heart in an embarrassingly personal way—the cake smashed into his shirt and face, the icing ground into his hair, his crest-fallen expression as he tries to extract the sticky sugary mess from between the keys of the studio piano. I want to take him to the men's room and stick his head in the sink. I want to massage his scalp with hand soap, carefully douse his sticky forehead with chilly tap water, and dry his face with soft paper towels, carefully erasing the disaster. I want to fix him supper and drinks as we wait out the long Russian night. I want to be Sonya to his ignorant Astrov. I want, desperately, to care for my Doctor.

This impulse goes unfulfilled. The moment passes, the fantasy plays out in my head, and Jerome washes his own hair. In my mind, Pridamant watches me, a look of disgust on her aged face.

“Where have you been?” I ask her.

“Oh, I've been around,” she laughs. “I've been closer than you realize.”

I stare, disbelieving, at the phantom woman in front of me. The years apart have not done her well; she is no longer my spiritual twin but my shadow, my negation.

“But you left me,” I stammer. “I've been so lonely without you.”

She laughs. “I've been with you this whole time. Look in the mirror.”

For months, I have been unable to stop looking in the mirror. “I have,” I say aloud.

“Look again.”

Terrified of what I might see, I step before the mirror, and gaze into my own reflection. Pridamant's dour expression glares back at me, mocking me with six hundred mouths, accusing me with a thousand eyes. My mouth, my face, my eyes.

I need to flee, to wrench my gaze from the labyrinthine mirror of my own self-doubt. I need to look at the world as it is, unburdened by the need to

imagine it as a companion. I know that I may find the heart to beat with mine, the art that contains my soul, but I cannot control when, where, or how. I can only keep my eyes open to the mirrored reflections . . . and wait.

WORKS CITED

Dr. Who. BBC. 1963-2010. Television.

Kahlo, Frida. *The Two Fridas*. 1939. Oil on canvas. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. *The Artchive*. 7 Mar. 2010.

Kapoor, Anish. *Untitled*. 2007. Stainless steel. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

232 - MERCER STREET