

Reflections | A. M. KAEMPF

I INTENDED TO ARRIVE at the art museum precisely at four o'clock, but on my way there I was distracted by the strangest and most upsetting thing I have ever seen: a replica of myself, identical to the very last detail, walking in front of me on the sidewalk. When he turned north on Broadway—away from the art museum—I hesitated for a moment and then decided to follow him rather than meet you as arranged. You will forgive me, I hope, for disregarding our engagement. The Picassos and Rembrandts are remarkable, but they simply do not compare to seeing a second version of oneself.

My double proceeded north on Broadway for six or seven blocks. He then turned right, toward the river, and continued walking at a leisurely pace. He stopped in front of an antique shop, lingered at the windows of an art gallery, and at last stepped into a café beneath the Belmont Bridge. I was afraid to follow him inside, so I sat on a bench across the street and waited for him to emerge. While sitting there a homeless man began to threaten me, first with violent language, then with equally violent motions of his arms. I had no choice but to flee. When I returned to the café a little while later, it was closed.

You must think I have invented this fantastic scenario as an excuse for not meeting you as planned. In the past, you will say, I have displayed a shameful enthusiasm for avoidance, a tendency to find pleasure in abandoning other people, especially those I love. I admit I have left various friends waiting for me at airports and train stations. I have skipped birthday parties, graduation ceremonies, funerals. I did not show up at your wedding—a sin for which you still have not forgiven me. But I am no longer the callous man that I was; I am no longer capable of orchestrating such elaborate schemes of escape. I am too old, too weary. Though I am as solitary today as I was back then, this fact is not due to any deliberate effort on my part. The loneliness I so eagerly sought has become a condition from which I cannot break free.

I promise my failure to meet you was not premeditated. Had my double not suddenly appeared in front of me, I would have arrived at the museum precisely at four. We would have shaken hands, embraced, reminisced about the shared moments of our pasts, and talked with harmless dishonesty about the present state of our lives. I would have exaggerated the terms of my pension; you would

have claimed to still be working, though I happen to know that you retired two years ago. We would have strolled through the museum without really looking at the paintings, arm in arm, whispering private jokes and laughing like school children. After much evasive conversation you would have confronted me with the inevitable questions—where did I go, why did I leave, etc.—and I would have replied, as always, with silence.

As I write this I am sitting by the window in my bedroom. The sun is setting behind the distant hills, and as the sky grows darker the glass in front of me becomes increasingly reflective. I see my face in it now as clearly as if I were looking into a mirror, and the sight makes me wonder if it might be possible to isolate a reflection from its source, to allow it a life of its own. Nonsense, of course, but after encountering my second self I feel less confined by the conventional restraints of reality. In fact, I have taken to behaving rather strangely simply to see if someone will challenge me or put me back in my place as a dull and dutiful member of society. Yesterday, for instance, I recited one of my favorite poems from the roof of the post office. No one paid me any attention. Afterwards I went to the library and checked out several books written in Dutch, though I cannot read that language. When I returned to my apartment I emptied the contents of my closet into a cardboard box, dragged it outside, and heaved it into the dumpster. I took the paintings down from my walls and replaced them with empty picture frames. I drank half a bottle of wine, carved my thoughts into the kitchen table with a bread knife, and then fell asleep on the cold and dusty floor.

You never had any patience for these antics of mine, so I will refrain from describing them in further detail. They are inconsequential, I suppose, especially when compared to the appearance of my doppelgänger. I have tried to forget about him, but my efforts have been in vain. Even in the silence and solitude of my apartment, which I have left only once or twice in the past few days, I am haunted by thoughts of him. I made the mistake of consulting my favorite books—those by Stevenson, Borges, Nabokov—and was confronted time and again by his presence. It seems I am not unique in my experience: the idea of duality stains the pages of Western literature; it has become a truism, a trope, and therefore it has lost its ability to upset us. But this abstract idea of duality would surely lose its charm if each person were forced to share my fate—forced, that is, to encounter one's double on the street, walking along as if everything were perfectly normal.

When I was young I often wondered if duality was inherent in human nature. Your father served as a fascinating case study in this regard. He spent most of his life as a schoolteacher, devoting year after year to filling the heads of teenagers with things they would quickly forget. Mathematics was his favorite subject, for he appreciated how it brought order to chaos. He would sit at his desk for hours and hours, devising complicated problems just to prove they could be solved. If he caught you reading a novel he would say that fiction was an indulgence for fools. But after his death you found a startling manuscript in a box beneath his bed. On its pages were descriptions and illustrations of all sorts of fantastical creatures, some of them borrowed from familiar mythologies, but others of his own invention and so disturbing that I will not describe them here. He had composed this manuscript over the course of many decades, adding to it little by little, crossing out certain passages here and there, scribbling notes in the margins, embellishing the illustrations, creating a vast but always incomplete compendium of the creatures that haunted his imagination. It was an encyclopedia of nightmares, a record of the irrational forces that led to his demise.

These reflections encourage me to remain rational. I try to convince myself that the man I saw merely shares a few of my physical traits: large nose, small eyes, scrawny arms, the peculiar hunch I've developed after so many decades spent reading and writing. It is unlikely that he has a scar on his right collar bone, as I do; unlikely that his upper right incisor is chipped, that his fingernails are chewed down to jagged stubs, that his left kneecap wobbles as he walks. No, my rational self says, I did not see my double; I saw a man who resembled me in certain ways, and I imagined all the rest.

It makes me wonder, though, what else I have imagined in my long life. The close friendship we once had—was *that* real? And the pain I felt when my parents died, the guilt, remorse, regret—can these feelings be trusted? Or should I discredit them as well? You must see how disorienting the experience with my double has been. The world seems to have tipped in the wrong direction, knocking my thoughts off balance and turning the simplest tasks into bewildering burdens. But amid this confusion one thought remains clear, a thought that causes me unbearable anxiety: that the man I saw is my double not only in body but also in soul.

More nonsense, you will say, so I will spare you the speculation and return instead to the facts. After seeing my double I began to question my sanity. In an

attempt to reaffirm it, I imposed an absurd logic on my behavior. I decided—quite reasonably, quite idiotically—that the easiest way to differentiate myself from the other man was to change my appearance. I found an old pair of scissors at the back of a drawer and cut off all my hair. I grew a patchy, pitiful beard. I went to the nearest department store and bought an assortment of new clothes, clothes my normal self never would have worn: pinstriped suits, flannel sweaters, lurid socks and tennis shoes, leather jackets and gloves. I even tried to gain weight by consuming enormous portions of food, but this scheme only made me sick.

These efforts are pathetic, I know, but at least they have been effective. You would hardly recognize me anymore. Indeed, I hardly recognize myself. The irony of what I've done is trite yet still disturbing: in trying to be myself—my *only* self—I have become someone else.

Although this letter is not very long, it has taken me several sittings to complete. As I come to the end of it a distressing thought occurs to me: perhaps my second self has already written to you. Perhaps you met him at the café beneath the Belmont Bridge, bought him a glass or two of wine, and listened patiently to his improbable stories. If you see him again, ask him to pay me a visit. I will confront him this time and demand that he account for his existence. I will explain to him that I cannot have a second self, and in reply he will tell me my resentment is misguided, that I should find consolation in the fact that someone else has experienced the same stupidities of youth, the same heartbreaks of middle age, the same disappointments of my present dotage. I should find comfort in the idea that someone else shares my unfortunate fate.

This evening I walked to the edge of the water and watched the ferry recede into the fog. In my predictably sentimental way I interpreted the scene as a symbol of our separation so many years ago. In a clumsy attempt to forget you, I went to the tavern on Market Street and ordered a bottle of wine. The waitress smiled as she filled my glass, the wine's flavors reminded me of adolescent summers, and now, from my table at the window, I can appreciate the melancholy splendor of the city in early autumn. The first bottle of wine will soon lead to a second, and my silence will surrender to the noisy conversations of strangers. I will abandon my sadness and plunge into the encroaching clamor. In the morning my troubles will return, but for the evening I am free.