

The Duet Between The Body & The Mind

Amanda Zeng

I

Years of my life alone, in an empty room, with nothing but a mirror. The hours spent in front of this mirror, trying to reach further, push higher, left my spine knotted and my muscles stretched thin like overused threads as if to defy the anatomy that makes me human. I feel the pull on my back as a tender ache settles deep into my spine, never quite leaving, but never enough to make me stop. As if a string was pulling my vertebrae up, and out of my body, leaving my body a boneless pile of pulp.

The hardwood creaks under the weight of my body as I step foot into the practice room. The fragrance of pine and rosin fill my senses. I hurriedly slip my pointe shoes on and join the others at the barre and immediately memorizing the combination—a skill I’ve picked up to survive in this environment. My teacher walked by the rows with a piercing gaze constantly scanning for bent legs, unpointed toes, and uneven lines. I felt my heart tense in nervousness as she walked near me. I lifted my leg as high as my body allowed in the arabesque, holding my spine as if a puppet was pulling me up by a string from my head during a pirouette. I overhear the critiques she unleashed upon the class.

“Your legs can always be a *little straighter, a little higher, a little more flexible*. Your feet could always be more arched, more pointed. Your ribs should be folded into your torso as close as possible. You can always be more—”

These words repeated in my mind like a mantra, as if the sheer force of my muscles could change the shape of the body I was given. This was the first lesson I learned in ballet: *you can always be better*. But what did “a little more” mean when I was already at my limit?

During the first hour, I don't even feel it. A slight reminder of my teacher's words linger in my mind to push harder.

During the second hour, a dull cramp settles in my arms from being held up in the same position for too long. I would be feeling the effects of it tomorrow, but that didn't matter right now.

During the fourth hour, an ache makes its way through my tailbone and up my spine. A fiery rush of agony strikes my lower back, feeling my pulse with every movement of the exhausted fibers of flesh and muscle. It was unbearable, but it would almost be over soon.

Just for a little longer.

At the end of class, I find myself toeing the line of fatigue and numbness, caught in a loop of straining and failing until each moment blurs into the next. Broken and mended, broken and mended, every cycle would eventually come to an end.

II

The second lesson was that the mind and body should operate in separate components. What occurs in the body should never ripple into the mind. Whatever thoughts, anxieties, and fears are negligent on the stage. The pain in the body is different from the pain in the mind. They act as two parallel rivers, always close, but never touching. Like threads woven from different

fabrics, one composed of a kaleidoscope of consciousness, and the other, an interwork of flesh and marrow.

The performance passed like a fleeting breeze; I barely noticed the silence following the ending of the music—hundreds of hands drumming in a disorganized symphony. As I am brought back to reality, I begin to notice the heat of the beaming lights casted onto my face as beads of sweat form at my temples. But this wasn't some amazing movie. The film doesn't finish after the curtains draw, the lights dim, or even when I take my final bow and waltz off the stage. For others, this would be the grand finale before cutting to the credits, but for me, this was just another cutscene before continuing with the next part of the story. As soon as I felt the last sparks of light fade from the crack in the curtain, I finally let my heels fall into the ground. The artificial smile leaves my features, and my hands fall out of first position for the first time in what feels like hours even though I know it's only been minutes. I often think of ballet as a double-edged sword, both a source of profound joy and a crucible of despair. It asks for everything and gives back in equal measure. Despite its grace and perfection, it can also be cruel and demanding. Peeking behind the closed curtains, the decorative tulle and satin reveals something more visceral and raw; the bruises, the blood, the hours of rehearsing alone in an empty room, and the little girl who once begged her mom to sign her up for dance classes with stars in her eyes.

Despite the applause and validation the audience displayed in their wide grins and rhythmic celebration, something felt off. *Just when did I feel so hollow?* A subtle dissatisfaction ached in my chest that I only notice in moments like these. It gnaws at the edges of my mind until there's nothing left, questioning endlessly if this is the purpose of my being— if this is what true passion means. Is it worth giving up half of my life just to become half as good?

III

The third and final lesson is discovering the difference between “was” and “used to be.” I learned this once I stopped introducing myself as a dancer as if it was a personality trait. Despite both sayings referring to the past tense, “used to be” carries a somber connotation, almost like a longing for the past or a wish to return to it.

Two years following my final performance I found myself packing my things to move to another city. Preceding this time, I had locked up everything that reminded me of ballet in a storage room in the basement, hidden, concealed, yet lingering in the shadows. It stopped me from mourning the version of myself that I could have become without letting it all slip away. The beauty of the past only leaves behind bitter memories. On the walls were framed professional photos of me the ballet company took every year, once a year since I was three. To the left of the room sat a clothing rack with all my costumes from solo performances. They ranged from flashy and glittery tutus from when I was five, to more poised and elegant skirts, adorned with gems and crystals on the supple fabric. As I unfasten the tarnished buckle of my dance bag, a gust of saudade spills out of the broken zippers, worn pockets, and the masses inside.

It's so interesting how humans build such profound bonds with inanimate objects. They can't see, hear, or even talk, yet they hold endless memories and secrets that are shared only with their owners. To me, they were more than mere objects, fragments of my soul, and an emblem of sacrifice dedicated to my childhood.

The first thing I notice is my pointe shoes. I run my fingers across the box of the shoe, worn out, and fraying at the edges. I trail the tips of my fingers through the flowy pink ribbons, contrasting with the hardness of the shank of the shoe. *Gaynor Minden 1993* reads the sole of the shoe. I notice a small brown stain sully the soft satin, now stained with age and wear. With ballet flats with frayed seams that carried countless pirouettes, hairpins that held my hair in the perfect ballet bun, and bandages that held my tattered body together during long practice days—the passion and determination of my youth bleeds from these artifacts.

Just when I had thought I emptied all of the nooks and crevices of the fabric, a crinkle perked my ears. I unwrapped the plastic package with anticipation and was met with a pink pebble of sugar. One of my previous teachers used to reward the team with candy after our group performances at the end of each season, celebrating our efforts with a sugary ending. The sweetness of the artificial strawberry flavor lingers at the tip of my tongue, leaving a bitter aftertaste. The fleeting reminiscence that danced on my palate was short-lived as it quickly dissolved against my tastebuds. The taste of melancholy is tinged with sweetness. The candy tasted stale. My love for this art had expired. As soon as the bitter aftertaste disappeared from my mouth, it revealed a clean canvas of surrender, making room for acceptance. No amount of guilt or regret could change the fact that I *was* a dancer. And before I knew it, the twelve years of memories I worked so hard for dissolved like a drop of ink in water.

I had finally surrendered that fantasy and let it crumble to dust.

