

Upon Learning That the Korean Word for Beautiful Means “To Be Like Oneself”

Alexis Lee

I once thought the magic
lived in Rapunzel's golden blonde hair.
Not in its cascade,
but the color.
Why else would it fade
when cut? So, I chased that gold,

bleached my silky black hair—
the exact shade of my mother's,
her mother's—
until it shriveled into
ashy, burnt marshmallow stick.
Dead grass.

Thick mascara, thicker eyeliner—
Sketching shapes I leashed from someone else's face,
shapes I didn't, couldn't, have.
My eyelids, like half-peeled mandarins,
cloaked my dreams.

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<https://thehowlmag.org>
thehowlzine@gmail.com
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Short skirts, tank top, and tan lines, I smothered
Hawaiian Tropic Dark Tanning Oil onto my skin, which once wore
SPF 50+ sunscreen, because porcelain-white skin, the kind that never saw the Sun,
was the Korean ideal. Here—
in America—I
melted and burned
to glow like the Sun.

When Rapunzel's hair was cut short
it lost its magic and turned brown.
Because the magic was in the gold, right?

But when mine turned gold, nothing
healed. No tower
fell. No prince
came. Only the memory of my mom's hands
tracing my hair. Soothing strands that snag,
brushing the wince away. The zigzag part
drawn, disheveled, redrawn
until I said yes.
In the mirror we looked
the same: Noses
worn to a stub like a charmed charcoal, eyes
pooling ancient water in deepest cisterns, lips
dainty and delicate as a cursed cherry. My face
re-surfaced from a long dive.

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I can't travel back in time.

I do my own hair now.

I let my black roots
push through the blonde.

I stopped borrowing and

returned:

the tanned glamour I chased on a foreign shore,
the face I drew on every morning and washed off every night,
the "White" ways that felt like a key
to belonging. I drained them all out
like dirty bathwater, cloudy with someone else's skin.

I refilled the tub.

This time the water ran clear
around me.