

Smoke

When I moved into my first apartment, I found that the company who owned my complex decided to hang large mirrors on the wall to make my room appear more spacious. My family was uncomfortable; it would be weird to constantly see your reflection while you study, they said, and difficult to fall asleep with your reflection staring back at you. I shrugged in response—I don't know how to admit that I don't recognize my own reflection and haven't for as long as I can remember.

That night, I tried to stitch myself together using fragments that others gave me. My mother claims I look exactly like her sister, and I tried to see my aunt's sharp jawline in my own. My aunts say I have my grandfather's eyes, fine hair, and rosebud lips. I looked in the mirror and saw a stranger with oily hair and a mouth that tastes like salt. My friends say my smile is sweet and my frame is delicate. I looked in the mirror and saw clunky shoulders and a grin that stretched tight and hollow around my teeth.

I am uncomfortable with my appearance to the point that I don't recognize myself in the mirror, and nothing I do fixes that. I spend hours tanning to match my father's skin, and never come close. I copy my mother's makeup, and my face feels heavy with disappointment. I chop all my hair off, and when I realize I still can't recognize myself in photos, I grow it out again. I think about taking testosterone when I don't hear myself in my high-pitched voice, and reconsider when I cup my breasts and feel a softness inside me that I can't give up.

I cry. I look in the mirror and see a stranger with swollen eyes. When I reach out to comfort them, my fingers touch cold glass.

Nowadays, I resign myself to the unfamiliarity. I follow the line of hair down my belly to the space between my legs, unable to comprehend the absence of a penis. I stare at bruise-brown skin, wishing bodies were like Legos and I could pull apart my flesh and rebuild with careful hands until this body makes *sense*. I realize now I don't know what that means.

When I trudge into my room at night, I avoid meeting eyes with my reflection; there's something prickly and uncomfortable about seeing a stranger in your own home. But after I've rinsed away the grime and sweat and stink of the day, I stand and face that mirror, tired and quiet and bare, and I catch a glimmer of recognition in *my* eyes.

I don't know if I will be able to connect who I am with what I see in the mirror. No matter how much I peel away my flesh, poke at the glistening chords of my throat, grasp at phantom genitalia, I don't feel satisfied. My struggle is tied to my ethnicities, my gender identity, and the way the world perceives me. I can't change that. This is my truth—I am not comfortable in my body, and I never will be. But there's no bitterness to this truth—it's sad, yes, and painful, but there's authenticity in making room for the contradictions in my ethnic and gender identity. I believe in my contradictions.

When I get into bed, I look at the stranger in the mirror and think, *I don't know you. And I don't need to.*

Then I turn my back on my reflection and close my eyes.