

2024 HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY CONTEST WINNER

My Two Worlds

By Hannah Brunick

I stare blankly at the mirror as she smears charcoal eyeliner into a wing on my face. She says the shape, paired with her ridiculously placed smudges of highlighter, will bring out the Asian in my eyes. I am a confounding collage of features: a biological representation of two cultures intertwined, yet they have never felt anything but separate.

My Western traits are admired by Korean aunts and grandmothers. They praise my large eyes and double eyelids. They paint me in the light of coveted American beauty. I did not feel this American beauty when I opened my lunch box and the other kids covered their noses. I did not feel this American beauty when they pulled their eyes back with their fingers and sneered, “*Ching chong.*” In these instances, I feel only the burden of that foreignness inside me. I am *other.*

I have my mother’s eyes when I smile; when my face is all scrunched with joy, people suddenly believe I hold some resemblance to every Korean relative I have. My sporadic moments of Korean beauty are hailed as a trend—an aesthetic. I do not feel this Korean beauty as I watch my culture become an internet fad, frequently fetishized to the point where I am disgusted to be myself. I do not feel this Korean beauty as I grapple with the ability to speak in the language of my family, nauseatingly conscious of the way I am allowing my heritage to slip between my fingers. Now, I fear myself in a different way. I am not foreign *enough*, just another uncultured girl amidst the ranks.

There is no question as to whether or not I have felt either side of this beauty. Undoubtedly, I have felt both, but I have yet to feel them on the same occasion. My two sides have always remained just that: distinct halves that cannot fuse.