

# REFLECTION

article by Rory Kranz



Having turned my head while riding the escalator, I am shocked to find my reflection staring back at me. There I am. Caught in the department store mirror. I look myself full in the face and realize that it feels like looking into the eyes of a stranger. Blue eyes. Dark eyebrows. Blond hair. A collection of features that I hadn't given much thought before, but now seem like a defining part of who I am and how I exist in the world. Dissonance knots in my stomach. Somehow when I looked in the mirror the features there weren't what I expected. Not that I expected anything in particular. Rather, I hadn't expected there to be a sense of disconnect between what I saw in the mirror and what I felt inside. Somehow I felt that in the time since I had arrived in Korea, my exterior had become something strange and new. Something imbued with a strange sense of otherness.

I think for me, coming to a foreign country made me feel defined by things I never considered to be a strong part of my identity. Now, I am American. One of the first questions I am asked here is where I am from. "I am from America," I say, over and over. The very repetition of it gives it weight and importance. I am from America. I am from a place of hamburgers and Hollywood, of hip-hop and Harvard, the so-called melting pot of the western world. It might be redundant to say, but in America I didn't think about the fact that I was American. When for the most part everyone around you is also American, it's not something that defines you. It's not unique, and therefore isn't something that I considered important to who I was as a human.

In this same way that I am now American in a way I wasn't before, I am also blond. It feels as if my features have become intrinsically connected with my identity. It's not so much that I feel like other people are reducing me to my blond hair, so much that in my own eyes I see how different I look from most of the people around me. In a terrible habit, I've found myself occasionally trying to see myself through other people's eyes, trying to imagine what crosses their mind when they see me. Do they see an American? Someone blond? Just another foreigner? It's incredibly, laughably counterproductive and will only lead to crippling self-consciousness, but I can't help but wonder. It's a mental game that I suspect

many foreigners in Korea can't help but play. Most people intrinsically care what other people think about them, whether they want to or not. For me, coming to Korea only made it all worse. I think it has something to do with the fact that I spent my whole life learning where I stood in relation to people in the context of my own country. Suddenly, thrown into the deep end of a new culture, I am overwhelmed by just how much I don't know. My identity is being simultaneously rewritten by both myself and the world around me in a convoluted process that even I, the subject, can't make sense of.

At the same time, there's also a part of me that couldn't care less. In quintessential American style, I think to myself: why the hell should I care what other people think about me? It's not like I can do much to change that. When put up against all the other things that matter or don't matter in life, I just can't find the energy to care. Self-identity isn't something you can jot down in a few words. It's complex and not something you even should be able to pinpoint. It's the sort of thing that's constantly in flux, and in my case trying to define it only leads to frustration and feelings of dissonance between who I am in my head and who is presented to the world. Or even who is presented to the people closest to me, the people I should technically be the most comfortable around. Thinking too hard about it seems to defeat the point.

There I am again. In the mirror right outside the Seoul National University Station #3 exit. Mirrors in Korea seem to pop up in the most unexpected places. At this point I've gotten used to being surprised by my reflection. I really didn't need to know what I look like stumbling home from an MT at 6 o'clock in the morning, but I don't really have a choice in the matter. A bright-haired, bleary-eyed stranger stands in the tangled city streets, air soaked in the the scent of fried food mingling with petrol in a strange, ambient perfume. The world slips around her like an ill-fitted jacket, everything tight and stiff in unexpected places--like she could flap her arms and throw everything off balance, splitting it all at the seams.

I wonder if my face will ever just be my face again. Or if even after returning to my home country I will take with me the otherness that now shifts in my features. If I'll peer into the water-stained bathroom mirror in my parents' house and, upon inspection, find that I'm still wearing my face like a Halloween mask--something separate from myself and wholly unrecognizable. I wonder if the world around me will be familiar and comfortable or if I will find myself in a foreign country all over again, once again having to redefine my place in it. If I'll have the willpower to go through that experience again. I wonder if the people I once knew, my family and friends, will be the same. Not that they themselves will have

necessarily changed, but if my viewpoint and sense of self will have changed to the degree that they seem like different people.

Then again, I don't spend my days constantly worrying about these things. Life is lived moment by moment, my existence made up of a series of inconsequential happenings. The beep of my subway card. Flush of a toilet. The autumn chill that makes me wish for a thicker jacket or a second skin. A laugh burbling unexpectedly out of my throat, the sharp bitterness of coffee, a headache after too little sleep for too long. The scratch of my pen against paper and the heat of a rushed morning shower. This is how my time passes. I can't sit down and think really hard and have everything fall into place. Life happens regardless of what I think about it or what I think about myself, so sometimes it feels useless and futile struggling to form opinions about either of them. I think for now the best I can do is to take those tiny moments one at a time and not expect anything to make sense. Because it won't. And expecting it to will only serve to add to the confusion. Then maybe one day I'll realize that although I don't know why, things seem to make a little more sense. I'll look in the mirror and find that familiarity I once saw before. Or maybe I won't. And that's okay too. //