

FACES IN THE MIRROR

Lisa Lee

Writer's comment: This essay, written for English 18 (Style in the Essay), explores how beauty, skin deep or not, saran-wraps the wearer, encasing his humanity, his anxieties and assertions-his life tokens-in an airtight seal of confidentiality. The essay also tries to relate the fact that sometimes, beneath the appearance of beauty, there lies a crippled genius or reluctant philanthropist; there sometimes hides someone betrayed and ashamed. Indeed, it is important for all of us to recognize that beauty does not always heal-often, it merely camouflages a festering wound.

— *Lisa Lee*

Instructor's comment: The assignments for my English 18 (Style in the Essay) class are rather open-ended to allow students to discover what their experiences mean to them and what they could mean to a reader. I urge the students to avoid cramming their experiences into neat packages, with a tidy conclusion about what it all means. In this piece, Lisa conveys her own sense of confusion about her grandfather and her heritage. Each time I read "Faces in the Mirror," I see more of its complexity; the densely packed details of sight and smell reverberate through the piece. Lisa has a talent for using a few small details to quickly render her family members, and yet the central character of her grandfather remains an enigma, despite the details devoted to him. Lisa does a wonderful job of evoking the mysteries of her grandfather's life in a way that reminds us of how impenetrable the experiences of our parents and grandparents are.

— *Jared Haynes, English Department*

Your grandfather was a real and true war hero. Nothing could bring him down-not bullets, not the damned Viets, not even bombs could stop him. He was a real fighter-bulletproof, I think he was.

It was August-time for the yearly trip to Grandfather's place in Fresno. It was in the middle of summer, and you always got the sensation that you were slowly baking underneath the soft canopy of the car while the trees whizzed by effortlessly. My mother opened the compact to check if her mascara had not strayed during the sweaty drive through the city. Though we were parked underneath the shade of the leaning oak by the driveway, the sweat still beaded hesitantly on her upper lip. She blotted it with her sleeve.

"If he had not caught the TB in Vinai, they would've let him come with us on the helicopter to America. He almost didn't survive the operation, you know..."

She reapplied her lipstick with one quick red, waxy swipe, making a fierce face in the rearview mirror-like the chimpanzees did at the zoo when they wanted more cookies.

"...But he's a tough one, that rascal...they had to put 22 stitches just to close him up because he still had the bullets inside of him. I like to think that his toughness runs in the family, don't you think?"

It was all true: my grandfather did fight in the Vietnam War-actually, he fought in many wars-he probably devoted his entire life to dramatic military execution, but he didn't like to talk about it voluntarily. He retold his experiences all right...down to the last grimy detail, only if you were fighting alongside him at the time, or got him drunk-whichever came first.

If my grandfather had devoted his life to war, then my mother devoted her life to preserving his valor. As a child in the dense jungle of Laos, she saw his every move: his friends, his allies, hurts and losses. He would move them from place to place-often before daybreak-to escape detection from spies and traitors. Often, my mother was still asleep and he had to carry her along with a cloth bundle while running through the wet, black jungle.

My mother remembers one sunrise atop a mountain where she sat upon his massive shoulders, legs dangling around his neck like vines and sleep still curled in her eyes, and saw for the first time the damage done to her village and other villages like hers. She wasn't sure if it had been Agent Orange or DDT (she's never wanted to know for sure) but where the land lay barren and sickly, she could only describe it as resembling the aching bald spots on a very sad old man. They were all alien and strange to her now...as if she had been taken to live on the moon.

Sometimes I wonder why she takes me to see Grandfather-every time we visit, all he wants to talk about is the war and how horrific and terrifying it was. As if she needed to remember. She never talks about it unless we're here, anyway...Personally, I think that she's just checking to see if he's still alive, or at least to see how much longer he has left. I thought, maybe-just maybe-she was hoping that with his death, the memory of a decade spent in fear would also pass away.

She was old now: her black hair had been permed and now, curly strands of silver slid out from the undergrowth of her bouffant. She had a habit of rubbing her earlobes when she was bored and coughed dryly when she was annoyed. And she was always making the strangest faces in the mirror-checking for lipstick stains on her teeth or for wandering blue eyeliner.

"Now remember, you should always look good and smell good for any occasion, you hear me? People will never remember you for your mistakes as much as they remember how good you looked. Remember that and no one will ever make fun of you for looking like an Asian-immigrant fresh off the boat-Disgusting things."

Mom coughed dryly and stepped out of the car and walked to Grandfather like a column of water-her

dress rippling and flowing gracefully around her ankles; she had enough poise and elegance to kill a New York socialite. She had this ritual: she'd greet him at the door and lightly shake his heavy palm with both hands (he always managed to look slightly confused every time) and ask, "How are you doing, Father?" in the most polite voice. Then, they'd start walking in and she'd flip around and motion me to come inside, too.

Inside, they would sit on the ancient sofa-the color and texture of old, velvety cheese-of course, my mother always discreetly swept the seat with her hand before sitting down. Then they talked about how horrible the war was and "remember when's" and "whatever happened to you know who's" would flutter about like flies-discussing miseries and triumphs in a strange, clucking language that pushed me far from comprehension. There, on the couch, she listened intently while he flung his arms wildly to emphasize what I could only imagine to be powerful explosions in the story-his fingers flinging shrapnel and ancient sockets groaning with the intensity of the action.

Rather than leave, I was seduced by this strange dance: the way his body swung in time to his shouting voice, his throat quivering like a turkey neck with each jubilant (or angry?) word; and she would nod her head to his spasmodic rhythm, shaking one leg to keep the beat of the conversation while she stared at his cavernous, edentulous mouth. I felt like I was the sole witness of an alien culture no one else had ever seen.

I imagined worlds being created and destroyed simultaneously as his leathery palms circled the air. I followed where his thick fingers pointed: the walls adorned with tarnished black and white photos, metallic medals hanging on purple and blue cords, dead flowers, incense. I also watched my mother bobbing her head like a pigeon, and wondered if she was really listening, or if she had heard this story before.

She had photos of him-before and after shots of his bullet-torn face and body, a dichotomy of a man that seemed supernatural. The surgery was supposed to heal the serrated pieces of flesh where stray bullets had slashed and exploded within; he looked like a chewed animal after the surgery. She got angry at me last year when I found the photo album stashed away in the corner of her closet-she had discovered me looking at them and slapped me, telling me never to do it again as I recoiled in shock.

Seeing him in person, I could understand why it hurt her so much to have the pictures in the first place. But if I was denied that, then at least I should've been allowed to understand what they were saying.

My teenage uncles (who lived with him at the time) often tried to translate it for me, but even their interpretations eluded me.

"You know..."

Uncle Rick's voice would squeak just a little bit as he handed me my Flintstone vitamin, his younger brother Esau lifting barbells by the kitchen table.

"...In our language, there's no word for 'goodbye' since we figure that we'll probably see each other again."

"Then what do you say if you are leaving?" I'd ask.

"You just say 'kuv yog pais'-which is the equivalent."

"But if you say that, you're not really saying goodbye...you're just saying 'I'm leaving'. Wouldn't it be easier to just say 'goodbye'?"

Rick would sigh and give me a scholarly look.

"Cause dearie, that's English-dad doesn't understand English, and as far as I know, you don't need any more help in that department either, do you?"

"I guess not...but then, what does my mom usually say before we leave, huh?"

He closed his eyes as he chugged his Power Man Drink and then compared his bulging biceps to the blonde gladiator smiling on the can, and sniffed, "She says 'goodbye' just like everyone else...and that's my point, you know what I mean?"

The profundity of his knowledge was more than I could take-really. I had expected a cultural revelation, but instead, I got a koan. My uncles also mentioned that my mother had been teased in Hawaii for looking like a chink, but oddly enough, no one had ever done that to them when they were in junior high. They said that it was probably because they looked so tough.

Sometimes after I had taken my vitamin, I would sit on the stairs to his apartment and watch all the cars zooming by-the heat making dizzy waves of color on the boiling street below: red topless sports cars, gray vans rumbling with sweaty children, ghostly school buses, and sleek silver sedans with stoic businessmen staring straight ahead. I would sit there and wonder if any of them already knew how to demystify their parents, grandfathers, and uncles-where the old man used to live, why my mother spoke Hmong to him alone, and why my uncles wanted to move far away for college and drink sodas that turned them into blonde Vikings with bulging biceps.

The summer before he died he took me to the bathroom to show me how to shave. I told him that I wasn't planning on growing a beard anytime soon, but he just nodded and smiled as he lathered his face with cream and spoke to me in husky broken English.

I watched him as he carefully cut the hairs around his slackened jaw, around the deep scar on his right cheek, and scraped the tiny Hitler mustache under his nose. He then wiped away the cream with one professional swipe of his towel and picked away at the small white remnants in the open trench with a moistened cotton swab.

The scar was like a river on his face: it ran deep and purple from the corner of his eye to the curl of his lip and was crescent-shaped, and the puckered banks were pink and shiny like chewed bubblegum. I saw a dark village on a sweaty moonless night and green men in the trees with guns and white-hot stingers that sparkled like firecrackers from the vernal blanket. I heard their voices buzzing like mosquitoes-incomprehensible-and their feet surfing the mud; and deep within a straw hut, I heard my grandfather trying to wake my mother, telling my uncles that everything would be okay as the jungle shook them awake with orange starbursts and thunder.

Had it been a machete or a bayonet? Or just a man shooting in the dark?

"You like?"

The scar was plump and swollen with water, but completely hairless. A droplet of blood leaked from the cheek and swan down to his chin-a small razor nick, nothing else.

"I good-looking, huh?"

I nodded in agreement.

He pointed to the blue bottle of aftershave: "Winter Mountain." He opened it to let me smell it-I had no idea that mountains could smell so putrid. I must've made quite a face because he smiled and pushed it behind the mirrored cabinet, pulling out instead, a small rectangular bottle from under the sink.

It was green and less pungent-almost sweet smelling, evoking misty outlines of pines in balmy fog, and made me dizzy with its delicacy. It could've been absinthe served to an artist in the French Riviera on a lazy Sunday or the extract of a rare exotic flower no longer found, but the silver label was distinctively written in languid Chinese script.

I watched him shake some onto his leathery palms, and splash it onto his face-it made a diaphanous glaze over his scars and dripped down his wrinkled neck in large globs, spotting his old shirt. As he felt the alcohol penetrate his raw skin, he squinted and grimaced, his jaw flexing in pain. For a second, I had remembered my mom's lipstick face-besides toughness, I hoped that making weird faces was not also hereditary.

"You try?"

He put the bottle in my hand and touched my face to make sure I understood.

It burned! I screamed for water-as though it would put out the fire on my face. He picked up the towel

but saw that it was still covered in hair, cream and blood, and dunked my entire head into the sink, and laughed when he pulled me out, sputtering and coughing like a drowned cat. I was drenched, wet, and sobbing-but I smelled like sweet pinecones-which, as my mother told me everytime we came over to visit, was all that mattered.

“You brave girl...” he chuckled, wiping me off with a clean towel.

When my grandfather died, my parents took me and my sister to his funeral in the Hollywood Hills. Although his body lay cold and thick inside the little white church, I was elsewhere: I went to sit under one of the crooked elms by the black and gray headstones and sketched in my notebook. I drew the solemn crosses and stone angels that were dappled in the green light of the trees. Though I thought of him lying in his casket with his livid lips slightly pursed as if in thought, I didn’t want to remember him that way. I drew the luminous angels that sat with their feet dipped in the sculpted clouds, smiling as I thought about how long I had wished to understand what he talked about so feverently.

Also, I didn’t want to be inside the church with its little white walls, listening to the speech my mother had prepared; she had rehearsed it nonstop as we took the I-5 down to Los Angeles. I had listened to her practice her tone and watched her making sad faces in her mirror for five hours.

I don’t remember what year or what time of day he died. I only remember the stone angels glowing like moonstones under the effervescence of daylight. I don’t think that I was trying to deny that he had died. I don’t know if my mother delivered a perfect eulogy. I don’t know if my uncles picked at their itchy wool pants during the service. I do know that I had been upset that I had not found all the answers that I had been looking for-I had not demystified him. He was still an enigma, and I was empty; knowing that he was already dead made me angry with myself for not understanding him in time. I had lost my chance to know him.

My mother cried at his funeral. She brought an entire box of tissues to wipe the streams of black mascara flowing from her eyes. Everyone said that her eulogy was beautiful, and perfect, and kind, even though by the end she looked like the creature from the black lagoon.

After he died, I read as much as I could about the war and I learned all about My Lai, Communism, Agent Orange and DDT, and about sea pirates. I took a class called “Hmong for Native Speakers” and I finally learned how to speak my language. I’m even better than my uncles-both who went far away for college, and now live with their own wives and children. Both have stopped wishing for blonde hair and biceps and have settled for receding hairlines and love handles.

My mother? She’s still quite deft with a tube of Revlon lipstick, and she still makes faces when she puts it on, but she has finally stopped perming her hair. She also took my advice to skip the blue eyeliner-it was too dated, too disco, anyway. Instead, now she dyes her hair black every couple of months and wears sweatpants when she meets family.

And I have my own bottle of Grandfather’s green aftershave in my room. He never made a will, but he gave us small personal items before he died: wedding bands, enameled animal figures, silver dowry bars, and countless photos and legal papers. Of course, I got the aftershave-which I don’t use on account of the first time I put it on, but I like to open it every once in a while just to remind me of how funny I looked with my black hair stringy and wet and stuck to my forehead; it makes me remember how his eyes twinkled as he rubbed the towel against my face to lift the hair off my eyes. That was some shaving lesson.

Even to this day, I sometimes feel that I have not completely understood the things that my grandfather did-the influence that he had on history, my family, and on me. Without him here, I cannot truly say that all that I have heard about him really happened; I suppose that was what caused the feelings of emptiness at his funeral. I felt like I was his final witness, but sometimes I forget that he even existed.

While sifting through old *National Geographic* magazines at the library for a Humanities project, I came across of photo of his gravestone: his portrait smiled stoically from the dark granite and for a second,

I wondered how they had gotten this photo. Did my mother know about this picture-had she taken the photo herself and continued her mission to publicize his valor as a war veteran and hero? She was the one who delivered the eulogy at the funeral, wrote the brief biography on the gravestone, bought the flowers...could she have also done this? I suppose I should ask her sometime, and maybe she'll finally pull out the hidden photo album and tell me why her history was so forbidden.

On the right of the photo, there was a paragraph written in italics-it was the dedication that had been written by my mother and uncles: "a grave of a dedicated soldier and general who served the American CIA during the Vietnam War, a loving father who lost three children and a beautiful wife in the struggles of war but learned to survive in a foreign nation despite his sacrifices. May his glory live on forever as his soul rises up to Heaven."