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Bleached

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Bleached

By Carley Taylor¹

Abstract

This poem speaks of Cambodia where skin lightening ingredients such as mercury can be found in an alarming number of beauty products. Beauty standards often make women around the world feel as though we need to strive to be perfect, better, continually comparing ourselves to someone else. This poem emerges from a trip I took to Cambodia, where I noticed the drive for women to achieve pale skin. In this instance, I felt as though Westernized culture was being forced down Cambodian women's throats—unattainably beautiful and pale models staring you down at every shop and billboard, skin lightening products everywhere, the government's heavy push to speak English. This poem pushes against the demand for women to achieve that beauty standard and reflects on my thoughts of how the push for white western beauty standards feels to me like a similar attempt to achieve a cultural kind of mask at the expense of the self.

Keywords: Cambodia, Beauty standards, Self-love, Bleach, Skin lightening, Mask

Your eyes are kindness
glittering within jewels
forged from diamonds Satan found
after the Gods punished his uncontained
bloodlust rising in red streams
from the cracked soil of your home.

Your dark hair is braided hope,
interlaced with Rumduol,
grown with determination,
to outlast the corruption
that cleaved heads from your
people.

Your skin saturated in sun
kissed by earth, loved by
all who don't possess the
heritage that scoffs at labor

¹ Carley Taylor graduated with a Masters in English from Bridgewater State University. During her time as a student, she attended two study tours (first to Ireland, then Cambodia) where she discovered her love for new experiences and culture. She later organized a trip to Japan and a second trip back to Cambodia, and plans to continue traveling at every opportunity. Her experiences while traveling often inspire her writing, although not exclusively. She published a short story titled, "It Didn't Matter Why" in *The Bridge: A Journal of Fine Arts and Literature* in 2018 in honor of her late grandfather and his conflict with PTSD.

and scorns rough calloused hands.

Please.

Replace that bleaching cream
with your Apsaras crown.

You're alive in-spite,
despite the insecurity,
greedy, ruthless humanity
of he who sought to break
more than your precious Hindu temples.

It may be hard to love yourself
when it was your image he impersonated.

And all the mirror does
is remind you of the children's screams
echoing over mass graves dug by your grandparents
who were first to feel the Chankiri's sharp edge
sever their cranium from their neck
as upbeat music blared overhead.

Or maybe it reminds you of the poverty
murdering in droves outside your window,
allowed to continue un-disputed
because he thought a well-located hotel was more important
than the river that fed you.

But he was not you—
Cannot be you.
Because you are kind
and resilient,
stronger than his illusions (of power).

Escaping the fallout of his destruction
does not have to mean escaping yourself.

So please,
replace that bleaching cream
with your Apsaras crown.