

Spring 2019-2020

Casey Shearer Memorial Award for Excellence in Creative Nonfiction

First Place Winning Entry

Eye Fold

Angie Kang

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As a child, I was never called a chink. Everyone told me my eyes were large, *for an Asian* was implied, and I didn't mind, or didn't put together the implication until later. I even had thin double eyelids, although they disappeared when I opened my eyes wide. Back then, that didn't matter. For a while, I didn't mind *how* my eyes looked, as long as they did.

I was born cross-eyed, and that didn't fade naturally as most cases of strabismus usually do. I also had an astigmatism, which might have caused the crossed eyes, and a lazy eye, which the crossed eyes might have caused. I got round glasses with corrective lenses when I was three and wore a patch for years to strengthen my lazy eye. There were a few different patches with pictures stitched on the fronts. If those were meant to seduce me, they ignored the logic that I wouldn't be able to see the illustrations. According to my mom, I would dutifully wear my patch for the allotted time, but the second my sentence was over, I would rip it off and stomp on it, never mind the fact I would need to put it back on my face the next morning. Victory was in those pockets of freedom.

I marvel at how my parents came to this country with a baby who had medical issues they still can barely pronounce. They were told by the first few doctors they saw that I would need eye surgery, but out of a refusal to subject their infant to any kind of invasive medical procedure (and an inability to cover its cost), they watched over my eyes with exquisite care.

Though now I've graduated to wearing disposable contacts instead of corrective frames, I still can't process 3D movies or pick out the special picture in the eye doctor's special eye book. I had always hoped that the next appointment I would magically be able to, and my doctor would say, *Yes, brilliant*, mark something down in a folder, and I would get to go home early. I wanted to know how different the 3D and flat cartoon apples could possibly look. Once, years after my

eyes had been more or less aligned, my dad, frustrated, pointed at what I'm assuming was the special apple and asked: *You really can't see the difference?*

I only cared about my eye shape the days after I cried. My eyelids made me pay for sadness, dragging down as if begging to be closed. When met with an unresisting pressure of opening, they pleated unnaturally against the crevices. The tension made me envision caricature villain eyes: two lines pointed straight down, fated to converge at the nose. The Internet will tell you that a cold metal spoon makes the swelling go down, but the Internet doesn't account for thin, impressionable Asian eyelids. Even if the swelling does diminish, the cutlery can never fully restore a lid that refuses to sit back in its original fold. Those days, no matter how nice my hair or outfit or complexion looked, I always felt hideous.

Three months before the end of tenth grade, my friend Melissa and I went to a Korean market for shaved ice. We stopped by a beauty store, and she pointed to a pack of eyelid tape under a neon green SALE sign. *Could be fun*, she said to me. I shrugged — it was her money. *I just want to do it as a joke*, she told me as she paid. *Because I already have double eyelids, you know?* I probably shrugged again.

Eyelid tape sounds like a ridiculous contraption that Western ladies in the Victorian era might have used, along with their mercury-soaked eyelashes and lead-paint covered skin. Of course, those particular ladies wouldn't have needed the tape, because most Caucasian people are born with double eyelids. Melissa was no exception. Tall and pale, she has doe eyes and a full British accent. That night she ended up staying over, an exciting rarity of a sleepover on a week-day. It was quite the affair, and we made the most of it by watching K-pop music videos we had already seen before.

The thing about K-pop is that their idols both represent and misrepresent East-Asian beauty standards. Everyone is beautiful, slim-faced, dewy-skinned, and doe-eyed. Nearly all of them have had some form of plastic surgery, usually due to the pressures of their company; if not, then by those of their fans. We understood the pressures of industry and felt we knew them. So seeing someone who was a “natural beauty” was always an event. *You’re saying Do Kyungsoo hasn’t gotten plastic surgery?* Old yearbook pictures would be compared with recent paparazzi photos, different angles scrutinized, and, upon seeing the only difference being one brought on by aging, our disbelief reshaped into delight. The rumors were true, this idol was indeed untouched by the blade. *Incredible*, we marveled to each other. *He’s attractive and it’s natural. Real.* We still admired the others, but without the same reverence.

That night Melissa ended up putting on eyelid tape, and I ended up copying her. Objectively, it was a disaster for both of us. For her, it mutated her natural folds into a horrific quadruple eyelid that looked like a screen-glitch. She ripped off the tape, laughing. For me, I put it on, and I liked the way I looked.

The precise origin of blepharoplasty, double-eyelid surgery, is subject to controversy. David Ralph Millard, a plastic surgeon stationed in South Korea in the 1960s, examined the process of turning the “Oriental to Occidental” through modifying eye shape. His writings seem to indicate a level of Western influence on beauty standards in Korea and by extension, the rest of East Asia. Millard’s first surgery was performed on, in his words, a “slant-eye Korean interpreter” who approached him asking to be “made into a round-eye.” The Korean man felt that Americans couldn’t trust him due to the closed appearance of his eyes, to which Millard later wrote, “As this was partly true, I consented to do what I could.”

Many of my conversations about my unnatural double eyelids revolve around the assumption that I wanted to look more white or “Western.” But most of the Caucasians I speak to are barely aware of the monolid/double eyelid distinction, let alone the nuances between varying creases. They’re blind to another sort of privilege, so accustomed are they to opening their eyes and having everything fold in the right places. (But that is not to say the privilege is linked to their being white, just one linked to statistical probability.) It’s also strange that one would associate double eyelids with Western beauty when it’s the East Asian demographic that is so hyper-fixated on them.

In their book, *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Interactions, Nationalism, Gender and Lineage*, Demel and Kowner make the point that nowhere in his writings does Millard acknowledge both his and the American military’s role in perpetuating these notions of inferiority. The Koreans were not only reduced in their reliance to the United States military, but also “by virtue of the military’s *racist ideologies*,” Dr. Millard’s views being just one model of them. Although his patients all came voluntarily, Millard’s surgeries legitimized the sense of shame that they had over their appearance and widely contributed to their desire to “become more like the Americans” after the Korean War.

But by the time Millard was stationed in Korea, many surgeons across Asia were already performing blepharoplasty, so perhaps this is an indication that it was already a culturally inherent beauty standard. Either way, it’s undeniable that Millard’s work propagated the procedure and influenced following generations.

When I was little, I did want to be white. I wanted to *be* Kristen Johnson, my mom’s soft blonde colleague who had blue eyes and wavy hair. I can’t remember her eyelids though, and now I can’t even picture her face. I only think of the fuzzy groundhog with a silk top hat that she

gave me when we moved away. I stopped wanting to be white long before I wanted to get blepharoplasty.

But I dislike the equating of “wanting to be white” with wanting double eyelids. The desire has grown so much in East Asian society that attributing the whole phenomenon to the general West feels lazy. If the double-eyelid culture has now become so normalized that many Asian schoolgirls receive the surgery as a graduation present, then can an individual’s desire truly be traced back to a singular man with his own prejudices? Moreover, Asian blepharoplasty has moved away from unnaturally large creases. The aim is not mimicry of “white beauty,” but instead, a deliberate attempt to flatter the individual’s facial structure.

Then again, by succumbing to the desire to change my natural appearance, I *do* perpetuate a desire to look Western, even if my intent is elsewhere. One more number to the overall statistic is one more figure closer to normalizing it, and the fact is, Caucasian features usually have these eyelids. These features are the ones being normalized.

I had a Korean friend in middle school who was equally as shallow as I, at least at the time. When we were bored in class, we would look at everyone’s faces and play a game: what was one feature we could change to make them prettier? Higher nose bridge, smaller cheeks, lighter skin – judgments projected onto our classmates without a second thought. We were exceptionally skilled at finding flaws in anyone, even our friends, even ourselves. The day we exhausted all the girls in our grade, we turned to each other. *Eyebrows*, I told her. I didn’t have the heart to be mean, so I picked something that she could plausibly fix. She ran her gaze over my face, and I could feel my pores prickling. *Eyes*, she said, tapping her own lids. *Double eyelids would do wonders for your facial structure*. Evidentially she had always been better at impartiality.

Or had she? I flip around the memory, rubbing smooth old emotions for the shape of facts. That friend had textbook monolids, creases flatter than my own, and sharper-edged. Maybe she could tell I wasn't being entirely honest when I picked her eyebrows. While scanning my face, she might have confused its surface for a mirror, saw her own insecurity that my face offered to her. It's possible, yes, that she chose what she thought I didn't have the heart to pick for her. But she also knew about the ubiquity of blepharoplasty even in her budding puberty, knew about how common it was to do now. It's also possible that she, too, kindly chose something I could "easily" fix.

(For the record, I liked her eyes. If I hadn't picked her eyebrows, I think I would have said her nose.)

With the new movement of loving yourself, a stigma has naturally become attached to cosmetic alterations. Certainly, it's commendable to "rediscover" your own beauty, ideal, even. There should be no pressure to change or reshape yourself for an ever changing standard. But I had already fixated on my eyelids. The tape made it something tangible I could control at a time when my body was changing too quickly to recognize. Folds sit differently every day, but after enough time, they begin to live in the same pleat. I was already falling into a crease and was so comfortable, I decided to stitch myself home.

My mom had the surgery, too. She gave up a few weeks of school to stay home and heal, and her professor yelled at her. *Do you really think beauty is more important than learning?* I know the right response to that question, but that answer is different from hers, is different from mine.

I knew a girl from high school who would get into fights with her mom about the surgery: her mom wanted her to get it. *Being prettier makes life easier*, she told her. *Why are you so ungrateful? I'm saying I'll pay for all of it for you.* This girl called me after one of these fights, once. *She doesn't think I'm good enough*, she sobbed. *My mom doesn't love me.* At the time I was outraged and consoled her the best I could. Now I still think it was a terrible thing to say, but I believe her mom loved her all the same.

My mom didn't pressure me. She just left the idea on the floor and then scurried out of the room. She told me when I was very little that if I wanted to, I could. *Maybe when you graduate high school*, she said. *That'll give you a summer to recuperate.* I may have been seven at the time, when trying to see forward a decade was unfathomable. It's funny -- my mom hated my eyelid tape. She told me it looked ugly, said that it was too shiny and too obvious. But I knew she understood because she was the one who bought the replacement packs whenever I ran out.

In her blepharoplasty, my mom opted for the suture method. The other method is slicing, but the suture method is gentler and supposed to be temporary, although my mom's eyes are still double-lidded. This method is for those who aren't sure, or who want minimally invasive surgery. I, on the other hand, was so tired of peeling off plastic tape every night that by the time I decided to get the surgery, I wanted whatever they did to last.

Some nights I would lay in bed wondering: *when was the last time I had gone an entire day without thinking of my eyelids? Would I be wearing tape on them forever?* On the days without the tape, I couldn't look others in the eyes. But eventually it didn't matter. Even if I wore it, I still couldn't meet people's gazes for fear of their noticing.

So it was out of survival that I began looking into the permanent alternative. I found a surgeon named Chase Lay, a fully bald middle-aged white man with an Instagram filled with

hashtags and a clinic five minutes from my house. It took months for me to persuade my dad to get a consultation. He becomes gruff when he's worried, or angry, or sad, and back then he might have been all three. One night, as we were washing dishes together, he quietly asked me: *What if this messes up your vision?* I admitted it might. *But I don't care.* More accurately, I didn't care enough, which amounted to the same thing.

At the consultation, Chase Lay greeted us with bravado. *Why do the beautiful ones always want surgery?* he said brightly. He was clearly practiced: rattled off facts, offered statistics, explained that my manufactured creases would have to be different sizes because my eyes were uneven. Even my dad had to admit that Chase Lay thought everything through. Chase used a paperclip to test a crease height, and the moment I saw what I could look like, I was euphoric. *Can I get it done today?* I asked quaveringly. Chase and his assistant exchanged a glance. *We'll put you down ASAP, sweetie. How's June 7th?* It was February then. I went home repeating the date like a mantra. Now my sentence had an end.

When I told my friends I was getting the surgery, there were a multitude of conflicting reactions. One who had monolids told me that I was betraying my race. *You're pretty already,* he insisted. *Why do you have to conform? Why can't Asian eyes be beautiful?* I tried to explain that Asian eyes *were* pretty, just not *my* Asian eyes. And, I added, the *Asian* wasn't even as much a factor as just the eyes themselves. Unconvinced, he told me I owed it to everyone to let them know. The very next person I told looked at me blankly, and said *Cool. Doesn't that cost a lot?*

During the surgery, I was awake. I still can't watch videos of blepharoplasty procedures online, and back then I tried not to imagine what was happening to my numbed lids. The skin between my eyes and the world feels so tender that even now, I shudder imagining the careful

precision required for slicing. Afterward, my eyes were purple, and I couldn't open them fully for weeks. It felt like if I rolled my eyes backward, the stitches would snap. Blood caked the black string, so I tried not to blink as much as I could. It became a nightly ritual to wipe away the crusted blood and trace my lids in the mirror. Often, even now, I wake up with nightmares that my double eyelids have disappeared, folded over. Impossible, I know, but only the memory of blood calms me down.

My eyes, no longer swollen, are now tucked sweetly into their sockets. The friend who called me a traitor to our race grudgingly accepted them as *natural-looking enough*, and now I doubt he even thinks about it anymore. No one else has much noticed, but it had never been for them.

I wake up every morning no longer thinking about my eyes. Even when I'm putting on makeup, I no longer marvel at the folds; instead, I will sometimes even note, disgruntled, at their unevenness. Predictably, my self-criticism didn't dissolve with the stitches either – it simply redirected to other parts of my body. Blepharoplasty certainly didn't fix the root of my issues, whatever that may be, but it did allow me to start looking up and meet people's gazes head on. I could say I feel unconditionally happy and guiltlessly pleased with myself, but that would be a lie. I could also say I regret it, but that would be even more untrue.