

Prompt #4: "What are you so afraid of?"

Critique

My eyes roam critically from one feature to another and catalog them in my brain. Instinctively, my cold hands comb through my hair, becoming entangled in the thick bleached strands. I stare into the mirror. My reflection peers back at me. The disheveled glass captures the truths I don't want to believe. I poke my cheekbones. I wish they were higher. I suck in my stomach. I wish it were flatter. My shirt is low cut and barely reaches my hips. I hear that is important. Never mind how uncomfortable it makes me to wear it.

The bathroom is as devoid of beauty as the glass proves me. The unwelcoming gray walls are worn down, covered with ignorant phrases written by ignorant students. The tiles that cover the ground are dressed in black and white, the floor a checkerboard with humans as the pieces. The crevasses that separate each tile are brimming with grime. The ghosts of past students haunt the stalls. It is almost as if I can hear them, laughter joined with excited conversations and shouts. Girls leaning on the chipped walls gossiping and giggling about topics that will be of no importance in a week's time.

I glance over my shoulder. A stream of light materializes from the opening under the door. I turn back to the mirror and I am again overwhelmed with the urge to fix. I remove a navy elastic band from my wrist and pull my hair into a ponytail. I crouch down, hoping to escape the hostile remarks of the mirror. I unzip the front pocket of my backpack and extract a small bag. Placing the bag on the countertop, the clink of the metallic zipper echoes in the empty room. I lay the contents in front of me and begin opening the lid of the container filled with a thick pale liquid. I apply the foundation, concealing the flaws that cover my face. I pull out the wand and start to poke at my upper eyelid. I continue until I am sure that each individual lash has a thick coat of black mascara. I continue to add layers of products to my mask, slowly remodeling my face to resemble the ones in

magazines. My lips become a new shade of red, my skin an unfamiliar tone and my eyes now seem to sparkle in the dimly lit bathroom.

Despite my new image I still feel empty. I look again at my reflection. My hips look larger than I remember them. My shoulders seem broader. My legs look bulkier. Why don't I resemble the faceless mannequins I see in the stores? I have done everything I can think of. My face is full of color, my hair is tied back. My clothes are revealing. What more do I need to do? I reach my hand out to the mirror and trace the figure of a girl. Using my own reflection as a stencil. I take my hand and erase the unnecessary parts of me. For a moment I smile. The reality of perfection so close. I try to grasp it but fail.

I lean my back on the wall and slowly crumple to the floor. The tears burst forth like water from a dam, spilling down my face. I feel the muscles of my chin tremble like a small child and I look toward the door as if the light could soothe me. My heart is racing. I am consumed by my imperfection. The tears fall to the floor and with it my makeup. It melts off my face, my shield from the world, broken. I turn and press my forehead against the dreary wall and I let my heart yank in and out of my chest. It winds back in like a yo-yo. Over and over. In and out. I am hollow. Empty. Not even the products can change that.

I stifle my tears and stand. Now the mirror only shows me. My eyelashes are no longer lush and perky but instead, the color that I applied to them paints my cheeks. The red bumps I veiled are now visible and my hair has returned to its unkempt state. I turn the knob and the sink begins its scream. I wipe the remains of my shield off my face and begin to apply and fix myself again.

When I finish. I want to feel ready. But I am still afraid. Will they like me? Uncertainty streams through my blood and captures my heart as I walk towards the door.

The hallway is now crowded with people. I welcome the chaos. My painted lips are forced into a smile and I begin my day.