

Mirror Therapy: a short fiction

by Raj Parameswaran

Two months earlier, the diagnosis had been a sobering one—all the more upsetting for having been delivered over Zoom. And now, the doctor on my computer screen was asking me to take a mirror and angle it towards my computer, then sit across from it. When I had positioned everything correctly, I could see my own face in the mirror, as well as the video he was going to play on my screen. A video that was breathtakingly difficult to watch.

“Take a deep breath,” the doctor’s voice said. “Remember what I said. This is you.”

This is you, I said quietly. This is you. It didn’t make it any easier. In the mirror, a scalpel was sinking into human skin.

An unorthodox treatment, to be sure. But for a situation as desperate as mine, I had nothing to lose by trying it. This doctor lived in another country. People from all over the world sought him out, but he did not have a job at any conventional hospital.

“The skin is not the boundary,” the doctor had tried to explain to me, in previous conversations. “Skin is in energetic conversation with the environment. You watch someone else in danger, even on a movie screen, and the hairs on your own neck stand up. You overhear two people flirting, and sense your own body’s arousal. We can feel *for* each other. Everyone outside you, everything you witness. It’s all taken into account by your own skin.”

“I understand,” I said, although I was not sure that I had.

Now, in the mirror in front of me, two human hands were parting the flaps of a person’s abdomen. This is you. The hands were digging inside. I glanced up to see my own face, my brow furrowed, slightly beaded with sweat, my eyes worried and intent.

“Mirrors are creative, not just descriptive,” the doctor had gone on. “This new method was modeled after mirror therapy, through which people who are paralyzed, or who have lost limbs, can reconfigure their neural pathways. Line a mirror up along your central axis. When you move your left hand, your brain reacts like it’s your right. The mind reimagines the body, utilizing the illusion of the mirror. This helped me to understand. The body is not a thing. It is a product of our imagination.”

“Sure, sure, okay,” I’d said, taking less effort to disguise my impatience.

“But you don’t have to believe that. You don’t have to understand any of this, for the treatment to work. You wear a mask,” he’d gone on. “It works, whether or not you believe it. You cover your nose, your mouth. But things enter through the eyes. Just by looking... Through the other senses... You don’t have to touch...”

Here the Zoom interface had buzzed a little.

“You’re losing me, Doctor,” I’d told him.

“And so the tumor in you,” I think he was saying, “may also be in me. And by removing it in someone else—by just appearing to do so, the tumor may also be...”

“Whatever,” I’d said. “You really don’t need to explain it more. I’m ready to try it.”

And now here I was, watching the healing violence of a surgery take place on a mirror in front of me.

I thought of my old job: staring at a computer screen, watching imagery of cities and towns thousands of miles away. People like ants moving in and out of buildings. I transmitted a series of commands. An unmanned drone released a missile. A poof of dust billowed up on my screen. A human being, they told me, had been obliterated. Later, I would watch my young son play an almost identical game on his tablet.

“How do you feel now?” the doctor asked.

“To be honest, a little lightheaded.”

“Breathe.” On the screen, the hands were rooting around inside the body. The hands emerged, holding something large, floppy and pink.

“What is that?” the doctor asked.

On the internet earlier that evening, I had seen a video of a man being killed. The killing had been recorded by half a dozen cell phones. What they did to his body... unspeakable... A million eyes around the world had watched. Only the one man had been killed. What had happened to the rest of us?

This is you. “I don’t know.”

“No, not on the screen. Down below, on your own torso.”

I looked down. There was a circle of bright red that seemed to have seeped through my shirt. I struggled to process. “I must have spilled something, at lunch,” I said. I looked at the same image in the mirror. The patch of red grew brighter and larger, spreading all over my belly.

The video had stopped, replaced by the doctor’s face, his eyes wide with excitement. “Show it to me!” My hands went down to lift the hem of my shirt. The man in the mirror was closing his eyes, two hands were holding up a writhing organ, a man was falling to the floor.