

Chameleon

Avirup Chowdhury

Four walls around me. Four whitewashed walls adorned with poster-cloaks, draped in the pale white glow of the dimmers. The posters are mostly of bands, but hidden among them are soft pencil drawings of various subjects, some still-lives, others the elegant figure of a beautiful young woman, her face masked in shadow. On one side of the room is a large, partially open window surveying the street below. Reclining beside it is a grizzled guitar. Timidly watching over me from above hangs the only clue to my background: a glimmering bronze idol of a god, which my parents insisted stay in my room. Beside my bed sits a desk and chair, books and papers everywhere. In this El Dorado of knowledge, a single photo frame takes refuge. It holds, frozen in time, several of my friends standing around me. We are at a concert: behind us, a band plays, their stage presence immortalised. Some of the papers cascade onto the chair, partly burying the blazer and tie sprawled across it. The echoes of my teacher's words from earlier that day resonate in my mind.

'People adapt different personas depending on the situation. It depends on who they are with, where they are ...'

My eye is drawn to the crumpled blazer and tie. In school, I immerse myself in a whirlwind of assessments, classes and study, and for a brief period every day, find myself no different from those around me. I become one of the pack, and for good reason; there is no time for a rat to dwell upon himself while in the race. I strive to push to the front, but this

very ambition separates me from my peers. I must appear to have a powerful work ethic to those who see me only during school hours, but once I return home, the mask is cast off. Only upon my return to the tempest can I once again don this disguise.

I find the gap between myself and my peers difficult to bridge in this persona. The quiet intellectual is dear to me, but social integration demands I conjure up another being, one who enjoys musical pursuits. Every poster on the wall, the guitar in the corner, even that photograph which lies beneath the mess is, to a great extent, part of a façade. The hope of acceptance by my peers through a common interest blurs with my true interest in the subject: I know not where one ends and the next begins. I am confronted with the question that, were I to cast aside these pastimes entirely, would I be welcomed in the same way?

The thoughts are overwhelming. I fall backwards into the soft embrace of the mattress. There is no solace. On the wall above, the god hangs above me, respectfully majestic. With this heritage comes a set of expectations and appropriate behaviours, which encompass my third figurative self. In the Eastern world, there is a social hierarchy based upon age; I find myself at the base of the pyramid. In this world, there is no place for teenage free-thought or rebellion, only for meek submission.

There is no escape from myself in this room. I rise and wander to the window. Gazing at the outside world, I watch people stride past on the street below. In the pale glow of artificial light, I glimpse a reflection. The boy who stands before me is not a Westerner: he has a strong foreign background. Dark skin. Black hair. Dark eyes. He is neither unattractive, nor memorable. His hair, an ethnic black, is styled in a Western fashion, ambivalent as to its true character. His eyes, deep and warm, smoulder with fiery determination. Blink. Overwhelming calm and glacial serenity envelops every glance. Blink. They sparkle with intelligent confusion, unsure of what outlook to project to this onlooker.

I look behind this strange, hesitant figure. Behind him, the bronze god hangs warily. It shimmers in the light, but is covered in silver scratches where the paint has been torn. Although its expression remains defiant, its appearance shows that it is nearing the end of its tether. Its end is near. Soon, there will be no trace of it, and then the West will triumph, proudly staking its claim to this wall.

This room is a testament to my personality, and I imagine that this is what my soul would look like. Even here, there is no clear dividing line between personalities: the picture drowning among books; the idol routed by Western posters.

I realise that, for once, there is solitude. There is nobody else here, nobody to appease, and no camouflage that must be worn to allow those around me to see only the aspects that I choose. But that in itself is my problem. I am alone with the one person that terrifies me the most. After a few years of practical necessity, it becomes easy to morph seamlessly from one character to the other. But that is the root of the problem: they are appearances. Guises. Pretences. I am simultaneously all and none of them.

When the chameleon sees itself, what colour does it see?



Avirup Chowdhury wrote this in 2010 when he was in Year 12 at SCECGS Redlands in New South Wales.