

NOTES ON BEAUTY

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Beauty only skin deep, your Japanese mother likes to say, and you wonder what she really means.¹ Is it one of the platitudes she passes off as linguistic coinage to disguise that she sometimes struggles with English? Does she mean beauty is a veneer? That it fades? Does your mother feel her own beauty is fading, or has faded, and has therefore become inconsequential currency?² Your mother never speaks about *inner* beauty—the value of kindness, or compassion, for example. Instead, your mother likes to tell you it’s a *doggy dog world*.

You are five and taking ballet lessons. You are very shy, content to dance dreamily in the back row. When your mother visits the dance studio on the day costumes are handed out in preparation for the first recital, she’s irate with your milquetoasty performance. Your mother wants a peacock, not a defective pigeon. At home, she angrily coaches you on how to peacock your way to front and center stage. She says if you

don’t, she’s going to *throw you away*—that you’ll have to go live with the garbage man, that she’ll adopt his daughter in your place. And so you learn to peacock for love. Of course, it was never enough. Of course, you were never enough. Of course, you still so often feel as if you will never be enough.

At eleven years old, you dramatically announce to your parents that you’re *fat*. You’re the tallest girl in your class. You weigh less than one hundred pounds. You’re imitating the posturing of the popular white girls. You’re imitating Valerie Bertinelli, who you have a secret crush on. In *Seventeen* magazine, Valerie Bertinelli says she hates her thighs. You are *trying to fit in*. Your father takes you to the doctor, who prescribes a diet of less than nine hundred calories a day.³ Your mother says nine hundred calories sounds like *too many*. And so you eat a tablespoon of peanut butter for lunch. A plate of lettuce with vinegar for supper. Your mother, who’s been struggling with middle-aged weight gain, likes to lecture

¹ And yet she shames you constantly for being such a stupid ugly. It’s as if your mixed-race body structurally refuses to conform to her internally written codes of beauty. She’s embarrassed by your daikon legs, by the hips you’ve inherited from your American grandmother—like two cats fighting in a bag. She expresses fury that you disobey her by not trying hard enough to grow a long swan neck.

² When you’re a child, your mother’s beauty is unassailable, unquestioned. She’s always pretty, always a glamorous swan. You beg her to let you brush her hair. You secretly love to unscrew the deep red lacquer lids, embossed with a dragon, of her Kokuryu face cream and inhale the sweetness inside. Your mother claims there’s mercury in Kokuryu, which makes it rare and expensive. As an adult, it occurs to you that mercury’s a skin-whitening agent. In pictures taken from when your mother was in Japan, she poses like a pin-up girl, with red lipstick and stylish Western shoes.

³ When you’re eight years’ old, you’re molested by the boy who lives across the street, and after that you’re prone to small self harms, nervous repetitions. There’s a secret scab on your scalp that you pick at to soften the anxiety. Your father discovers the scab and takes you to the doctor who prescribes an antibiotic ointment. The doctor suggests that maybe the scab gets knocked off when you brush your hair, and when you meekly say yes, your father screams, “It’s because she won’t stop picking at it!” then slaps you across the face in the doctor’s office. “Why don’t we all calm down?” asks the doctor even though there’s only one person who isn’t calm. When you get home, your father cuts off all your hair around the scab, though you beg him not to, leaving a big bald spot, then clumsily hairpins a cotton ball soaked in Epsom Salts to your head and makes you go to school that way. You say everyone will make fun of you. Let them, he says. *Let’s see how you like them apples*.



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you on *will power!*⁴ But you know about the tins of secret chocolate she keeps hidden around the house, how she eats them while lying down on the sofa in the afternoons, watching *As the World Turns*, *Guiding Light*, *General Hospital*.



As a teenager, you begin desperately trying to manufacture any sort of shield, or social armor, to protect yourself—mostly in order to pass by without comment, without harassment.⁵ Your mother mocks your early-morning rituals of curling irons, tweezers, makeup.⁶ *You not fool anyone trying make silk purse from pig ear*, she says, then laughs and laughs.⁷



The mean girls sitting in front of your mother at the ballet recital dress rehearsal keep hissing “thunder thighs” while you’re dancing your solo. Afterwards, your mother’s filled with a mean kind of glee when she tells you about it. *Aren’t you embarrass for self?* she asks. She says you should know what everyone’s talking about behind your back. She’s the only one you can trust, she insists, to tell you the truth about yourself to your face.⁸



⁴ Your mother keeps a box of Ayds candy on the side table next to the sofa. They are an appetite suppressant candy intriguingly packaged like a box of caramels, individually wrapped in shiny cellophane wrappers. They contain a stimulant called phenylpropanolamine, commonly prescribed to dogs with bladder problems. Sometimes she dangles an Ayds candy in front of you, but then takes it back, saying she doesn’t want to waste it on you. Your mother likes to tease you with treats of food. During long drives to swim meets, she will break out snacks and share them with your father, then alternately proffer and withhold them from you in the back seat. Finally, she will sometimes throw a few pieces of food into the back seat at you, as if you were a dog. This is the same way she proffers then withholds the Ayds candy.

⁵ When your skin begins to blotch with acne, your father buys a blackhead remover tool and obsessively spends hours at a time pushing the metal tool into your face in a way that hurts and leaves marks. You are forbidden to touch your own face. If you’re caught touching your own face, you’re punished.

⁶ The sophomore girls pierce their ears with needles during French class. You decide to try this at home. When your father sees your ears, he hurls a TV tray across the living room, then smacks

Around the time the daily weigh-ins begin, your father puts a picture of you on the refrigerator as *inspiration*. He says it represents *when you were in the best shape of your life*.⁹ You are ten years old in your swim team swimsuit. Your collarbones, kneecaps, and hip bones jut out alarmingly from your skin. You weigh just a little bit under seventy pounds. What you remember of that time is feeling sickly, frail. The picture is taken following an intense bout of chickenpox, after which your immune system tanks and you come down with a terrible fever. You remember hallucinations at night lasting for over a week. Your weight plummets. You miss over a month of school. Afterwards, you can’t even get through the first part of a swim workout, or complete the barre portion of ballet class. You remember feeling wasted away: like a candle burned right down to its wick.



You are forty-four years old and visiting your parents when your mother begins to needle you about the large plate of salad you’re eating for dinner. *You never going to lose weight that way*, she complains. Yet you’re the thinnest you’ve been in over a decade. She says you must *weigh more than elephant*. She says the problem is your lack of shame. She says you need to take off your clothes, stand naked in front of a mirror, and take

you upside the face. He takes you to the doctor and makes him give you a tetanus shot. You are grounded for two months.

⁷ And yet the house is filled with an infinite river of women’s magazines checked out weekly from the public library: *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, *Seventeen*.

⁸ And yet she refuses to help you with any of the things that make you a moving target for ridicule: the discount catalog plastic eyeglasses; the at-home administered bollo-head haircut; the high-water pants; the orthodontic headgear your parents make you wear during the day to school instead of just at night as prescribed.

⁹ Your father likes to comment on the bodies of girls in your ballet company. He becomes agitated, shouting at you that all of them—all of them!—are way, way, way overweight! He talks about how Cyd Charisse is a superior partner to Fred Astaire than Ginger Rogers because she has the longest legs. Later on, when you’re a senior in high school, he goes on for weeks how—in the dance competition episode of the frothy ’80s television show, *Double Trouble*, about a pair of identical twins attending high school in Des Moines—Kate’s dance routine was so much better than Allison’s dance routine, because it was sexier.

a good look at yourself, so you can feel *ashame*. You wonder what amount of *ashame* would make your mother happy. The days you can't even bring yourself to leave the house? The days you spend dreaming about suicide? *Why you make me such embarrass?* she asks in disgust. When you say it's not okay for her to talk to you that way, that you're ending the visit and going home, she says that if you leave, it's all over between the two of you, that you will no longer be family.¹⁰

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Regarding your need for social armor: paradoxically, in many ways it's more about *shyness* than it is about *vanity*. You wear your social armor as a shell to avoid mollusk-without-a-shell-iness. As a kind of *prosthetic* to insure basic functionality. A smooth, protective shellac to keep woundedness from the open air. A smooth, protective shellac to keep out bacteria, grit, and dirt from what's raw.

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The price of "beauty": never being able to feel comfortable in your own skin, your own body. And yes, the therapy, and yes, the body positivity, and yes, the internalized misogyny, and yes, you don't owe anyone thinness, or beauty, and yes, you know how to do the exhausting mental gymnastics, and yes, *intellectually*, you know, you know, you *know*.... But that doesn't fix the *feeling* of it, and what does it mean, really, to not feel comfortable, to not feel safe, in your *own fucking body*?

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More and more, as you get older, you recognize physical aspects of your mother in yourself: the dimpled hands with creased-pillow knuckles, a resting downturned mouth over an overbite, the smattering of freckles in a raccoon's-mask pattern when you've gotten too much sun, the mismatched eyebrows, a brown age spot on the lower left cheek near the jawbone, the high but crooked Horikoshi cheekbones. In lieu of wrinkles, a certain dark heaviness beneath the eyes. These glimpses, these flashes in pictures and mirrors, startle you, this recognition of your mother's features in your own. The truth is that in your eyes, your mother was *always unutterably beautiful*.

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In this recognition of small flickers of your mother's beauty, you hear your mother's voice saying, *Beauty only skin deep*. And you realize you're *afraid* of what lies beneath the surface.

It's disturbing when the face you're having trouble forgiving is now your own.

And why is it that the hardest thing for the self to forgive is the self? •

These glimpses, these flashes in pictures and mirrors, startle you, this recognition of your mother's features in your own. The truth is that in your eyes, your mother was always unutterably beautiful.

¹⁰ Eventually, you'll joke to your friends about the time your mother disowned you for being too fat. But it's not funny. Not really.