**Pretty**

by Katie Makkai

When I was just a little girl, I asked my mother, “What will I be? Will I be pretty? Will I be pretty? Will I be pretty? What comes next? Oh right, will I be rich?” Which is almost pretty depending on where you shop. And the pretty question infects from conception, passing blood and breath into cells. The word hangs from our mothers' hearts in a shrill fluorescent floodlight of worry.

“Will I be wanted? Worthy? Pretty?” But puberty left me this funhouse mirror dryad: teeth set at science fiction angles, crooked nose, face donkey-long and pox-marked where the hormones went finger-painting. My poor mother.

“How could this happen? You'll have porcelain skin as soon as we can see a dermatologist. You sucked your thumb. That's why your teeth look like that! You were hit in the face with a Frisbee when you were 6. Otherwise your nose would have been just fine!

“Don't worry. We'll get it fixed!” She would say, grasping my face, twisting it this way and that, as if it were a cabbage she might buy.

But this is not about her. Not her fault. She, too, was raised to believe the greatest asset she could bestow upon her awkward little girl was a marketable facade. By 16, I was pickled with ointments, medications, peroxides. Teeth corralled into steel prongs. Laying in a hospital bed, face packed with gauze, cushioning the brand new nose the surgeon had carved.

Belly gorged on 2 pints of my blood I had swallowed under anesthesia, and every convulsive twist of my gut like my body screaming at me from the inside out, “What did you let them do to you!”

All the while this never-ending chorus droning on and on, like the IV needle dripping liquid beauty into my blood. “Will I be pretty? Will I be pretty? Like my mother, unwrapping the gift wrap to reveal the bouquet of daughter her $10,000 bought her? Pretty? Pretty.”

And now, I have not seen my own face for 10 years. I have not seen my own face in 10 years, but this is not about me.

This is about the self-mutilating circus we have painted ourselves clowns in. About women who will prowl 30 stores in 6 malls to find the right cocktail dress, but haven't a clue where to find fulfillment or how wear joy, wandering through life shackled to a shopping bag, beneath those 2 pretty syllables.

About men wallowing on bar stools, drearily practicing attraction and everyone who will drift home tonight, crest-fallen because not enough strangers found you suitably fuckable.

This, this is about my own some-day daughter. When you approach me, already stung-stayed with insecurity, begging, “Mom, will I be pretty? Will I be pretty?” I will wipe that question from your mouth like cheap lipstick and answer, “No! The word pretty is unworthy of everything you will be, and no child of mine will be contained in five letters.

“You will be pretty intelligent, pretty creative, pretty amazing. But you, will never be merely 'pretty'.”