

Pretty

Gracie Rowland

—Essay Competition

Grandma said that no one will love me if I'm not pretty, that attractive people get further in life, and that ugly people never achieve true happiness. Southern women are held to a higher caliber than "those silly Northern girls," and Miss USA is often Miss Mississippi for a reason. Our glistening, golden southern suburbia breeds bronzed beauty queens and debutantes clothed in ivory silk. The Bible Belt is steeped in ideals of transcendent excellence, swirling and darkening our clear waters. If only Slim Aarons could see us now, with our country clubs of shine. My mind and heart didn't seem to check those legalistic black boxes of "enough." No one cared if I had a brain; only beauty could make me whole

I wanted to be loved, so I became lovely. I learned what calories were, and how to count them. I stuck two fingers down my throat after most meals and popped laxatives like Skittles. *Pride and Prejudice* lost its crown of literary favorite to *French Women Don't Get Fat*. I replaced broken nails beds with shiny pink acrylics and bleached my hair till it shone gold and yellow, constantly trying to cover up the pain of the past and the threat of the future.

My relentless fixation upon perfection stemmed from the lack of control I had in my life. I was dying, and I wanted to feel whole again. I felt as if I was standing on a precipice, and that someone could push me at any time. The rivers of dismal anguish churned and roiled beneath me, and the idea of jumping existed as a singular comfort. I was depressed and anxious, but most of all I was tired. I wanted to reach for something, anything, to justify my existence, to prove to myself that my life was worth living. Validation became my drug; and the dependence made me into a reckless addict. I wanted to be beautiful, and I wanted to be admired.

After a while, Grandma said I was a pretty thing. That I was a Southern Belle now, her greatest achievement. Yet I still found it hard to battle that aching, screaming melancholy sitting in my bones. I

still stared in the smudged mirror and remembered my childhood, remembered the pain I felt sitting alone in that empty hotel room. The mirror haunted me, and as my eyes disassociated from my body, all I saw was green. My throat closed with a sticky gasp and my mind became desperately crowded. I wept on the cold bathroom floor in a haze of weariness, and I wept on the warm car seat in a haze of anger. I was searching, clawing, itching for something to make me feel worthy. I still didn't like myself, even though others did. I didn't feel pretty, but at least I looked it.

I've overcome my demons now; I've banished them away in a chest stuffed with size double zero jeans that no longer fit. I decided not to be another statistic, and I decided to live. It took me a long time, a really long time, to love myself, but now that I do, the feeling is euphoric. I eat pizza without feeling guilty and I wear makeup because it's fun. I cry a lot less and I smile a lot more. I'm not the Southern dream and I'm not without flaw. But I claim my place in the world because I claim myself. I love who I am, and I love what I've become. I realize now that I'm more than my perceived face value. Now, even when I don't look pretty, at least I feel it. △



Rebecca

Second Place—Drawing

Shelby Tisdale

Graphite