

# Beauty

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Margaret O'Connor

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# Chapter One

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## Understanding Beauty

There is a small chance I am beautiful. Since I was nine years old, maybe, until now, fifteen years later, as I sit sipping tepid coffee at six eleven in the morning before I go teach seventh grade English, I have had a handful of people tell me I'm beautiful. There is a kind of beauty which I possess—one which is undetectable for most of my existence. It presents itself, most often, when I am in water. I'll kick down to the darkest parts of the lake, where I can reach out and grasp a fistful of slippery mud and emerge into the sunlight, my hair long and smooth against my back, eyes closed. It is when I am in water my friends notice.

"Margaret—you're beautiful," they'll say, the words seeming to surprise them as much as they surprise me.

I'll smile. "Awwwww, shucks. So are you."

"No—I mean it. You're really, *really* beautiful."

Perhaps it's that my glasses don't come with me when I am in the water, or that my normally frizzy, unruly hair has to elongate and

behave under the weight of carrying lake in its curl. Perhaps it's the sight of me existing where my body feels most at home, where the memory of years on the swim team have sunk deep into my bones, so that the moment I dive off the boat— feel it give and sway under the force of my legs, and propel into that silent haven of cool, murky weightlessness, suddenly, bespectacled, clumsy, frizzy-haired Margaret no longer exists. Someone beautiful surfaces in her stead. I have often wondered if this is the Margaret my husband always sees, for there isn't a day that he doesn't light up at the sight of my smile, sneak glances at me while I slump in the car, changing the radio stations, pretending not to notice. His sight is either skewed or amended by his love. I don't care which.

Beauty has always been something of a strange concept to me and society. It seems, to some degree, obtainable to anyone who has the time and money to pursue it. Hair can be extended, breasts augmented, every face a blank canvas awaiting an artist's touch. I have nothing against these rituals, although I've never mastered them. I have no money for hair extensions or plastic surgery. I did, at the beginning of last summer, call my friend, Anna, to ask her to take me shopping. I was in the midst of finishing my graduate degree in Creative Non-fiction and had been pondering my ability to build a platform as an author. I decided that I ought to try my hand at makeup. Successful people— successful women, in particular— all seemed to be very fashionable.

"They're all as beautiful as they can be," I tried to explain to my husband. "Like, it's not that they're all models or anything— but all their clothes fit. They all know how to do makeup."

So, Anna took me to Ulta and walked me around the store, explaining the various paints and their purposes. I bought a hundred and seventy dollars' worth of makeup that day, which isn't as much as

it sounds, and went home to watch an hour and a half long Youtube video featuring a beautiful woman making herself more beautiful with various painting techniques. After two hours of painstakingly applying primer, foundation, blush, and eye liner, I emerged from the bathroom, a deflated balloon.

“Applying make-up is harder than getting a master’s degree,” I texted Anna, and melted onto the couch, exhausted.

I simultaneously desire and fear beauty. It’s a ghost that’s haunted me all these years, always looking over my shoulder, glowing with pride or bearing its yellow fangs. I have nothing against beautiful people. Sometimes, I am one of them. But it’s one of the more complicated parts of my being. I want it and its effect on my life to be better defined. It takes a specific kind of element to be credited for a person being preyed upon by a swim coach at twelve-years-old and then, nine years later, making her husband’s eyes fill with tears, as he mouths the single word, “*Wow*,” on her wedding day. What is this ghost? How has it haunted me and the society I’ve lived in all these years?

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# About the Author

Margaret O'Connor is a public speaker and bestselling author. Her works have been published in both literary and academic journals, and she was a finalist for the Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction with the Bellingham Review.



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# Also By Margaret O'Connor

## Turtle Soup Is Enough

**Did you know that the fluid in your spinal cord is the same color as lemonade?**

I sat and watched it drip from my little brother's limp body into a medical bag on his bedside, as one of his surgeons told us the news that nearly shredded my faith to chaff.

***"This kid will never walk again."***

These essays were written during the worst year of my life. I wrote them for one of my college classes, answering various prompts on the theme of place. I didn't know at the time that I was chronicling a fight for my existence.

My family and faith have never been about fitting in. We don't believe in God because of what they say at church. We see him in the mud that cakes our jeans and the laughter we share around the campfire, drinking beer and listening to the grisly stories our dad brings home

from the ER. Our faith in God has never been about propriety; it's been about relationship.

*How can you reconcile that kind of faith when it seems like God stands by as your whole world falls apart?*

When my faith went up in flames, I found truth like I never had before. Sometimes God shatters you to shatter the lies you didn't know you believed, and there's nothing left to do but buck up and face what's right.

Faith is tested, hope victorious, and valuable lessons are learned along the way in this raw, wildly funny and inappropriate memoir.

*If you're looking for a pat-answer, neat and tidy devotional about God's work when tragedy strikes, move on. O'Connor brilliantly captures the complexity of grief and faith in her gut-wrenching, hilarious, and beautiful telling of stories that have shaped her understanding of God's love.*

– Michele Goodrich