Our Various States of BeAuty

By Watsuki HarrinGTON

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A classroom assignment that turns out to be something more. We like the way the author wittily contrasts geographical states with the psychological and emotional states of 52 women in a fictional beauty pageant. At the same time, the Misses are depersonalized by an innovative format that simply lists the wryly observed and fascinating trivia in their cameos like so much dependent property—the point being, within beauty lies its opposite. The voice is appropriately impartial, cleverly ironic and a little bit foxy. We were intrigued as soon as we started reading but when we learned how the author enlisted tek to design the structure of this hybrid, we liked it even more. We don't know how her prof graded this assignment, but in our classroom we give it…*

Five stars.

(Spacing and format is author's own.)

Our Various States of Beauty

1. Miss Wyoming thinks that since she had to look up the word *pustule* that makes her one of the attractive ones, which is bizarre, because she's had to look up other things like "statute of limitations for drug trafficking," and "how to get a free abortion in a state that doesn't take your insurance."

2. Miss Michigan wants to open a bakery with a gym in the back so she has a steady stream of clients. She's unsure about the name but thinks "It's a Bakery and a Gym" is a pretty good contender.
3. Miss Oklahoma knows that even though a woman wants to look sexy, it doesn't mean she wants to have sex.
4. Miss Nevada has a subscription to *Interview* magazine, which helps to curate her own style. She thinks ironic dressing is better than being cute.
5. Miss Alaska has a hard time separating beauty from sex.
6. Miss Virginia was told to always wear heels to auditions because they're looking for something taller than her.
7. Miss Missouri remembers reading a quote that goes something like, "The prettiest thing you can wear is a smile." Now she smiles at everyone believing she's being pretty. As a result, men come up to her, *advance,* ask her if she comes here often, or where have they met; things that make no sense. She's confused. She's just being pretty; she doesn't want the attention.
8. Miss Ohio dreams of having a daughter that calls her mama and feeds her Goldfish in the back-yard.
9. Miss Hawaii has had three abortions and may be pregnant again, though the judges don't know this and neither does she.
10. Miss Louisiana thinks her mother's hands are so beautiful. Wrinkly and moist like chicken thighs fresh out of the package. Those hands show the life she's lived in service and love to others. They aren't crinkly and old. She'd be honored to have those hands. (And she will.)

11. Miss Arkansas will get a mommy make-over once she's given birth to her three kids: the heir, the spare, and her little princess.

12. Miss Wisconsin wishes she could be smart enough so that she didn't have to be beautiful.

13. Miss Arizona will go to Rome with her family next year and in the airport she will see a banner with Sophia Loren and a quote that says, "Everything you see I owe to spaghetti." When she returns to the States, she will continue to eat pasta with reckless abandon. She will gain thirty pounds instantly and no one will ever believe for the rest of her life that she was in a beauty pageant.

14. Miss New Jersey has a hard time separating beauty from power.

15. Miss Connecticut will marry an attorney, and will try to be beautiful for him, but not so beautiful that the other husbands notice her more than they notice their own wives.

16. Miss New Hampshire is good with names, which makes it easy to care for others. She calls her friends regularly, calls, not texts. And because she has a penchant for elegant stationary, she sends hand-written letters often to her family in other states.

17. Miss Iowa hasn't eaten carbs since she was twelve. Once, a few years back, she accidentally ate a stray crouton at lunch in the school cafeteria. She let the salty crunchy goodness mush gluten heaven into her veins, sending her nerves exploding to the moon.

18. Miss Washington loves going to the mall, not to shop, but to be seen.

19. Miss Illinois wants her nail polish sometimes to look like the color of blood, but sometimes she wants her nail polish to look like the color of her vulva.

20. Miss California was brought roses by a suitor once, to which she frowned. He asked her *what's wrong, don't you like roses?* She said *I like orchids more, you know, all that*

waste, you don't throw away orchids because they'll bloom again. The next time they saw each other, he brought her orchids.

21. Miss Puerto Rico has a boyfriend who buys her rings so that he doesn't have to buy her The Ring.
22. Miss Montana attracts people with a magnetism no-one quite knows how to describe.
23. Miss Colorado is having an affair with a woman online. She is remiss to tell her family that she's gay because they've spent so much time grooming her to get to this place and qualify for this pageant, which is her best hope of getting a scholarship big enough to attend the university her parents have picked out for her. They are her biggest fans and tell her she's beautiful every day.
24. Miss Alabama loved carbs and sugar as a child, so her mom made her love running too.
25. Miss Oregon wishes she could be talented enough so that she didn't have to be beautiful.
26. Miss Massachusetts is curious and loyal and always makes you feel seen.
27. Miss Minnesota admires her aunt who studied glaciology when she was a kid. All that ice, like a gigantic mirror shining the sun's light into her aunt's eyes every day. As a result, her aunt has the worst crows feet you'd ever seen. But what those wrinkles say is that she did something significant with her life.
28. Miss Kansas has a hard time separating beauty from stress.
29. Miss Tennessee will be told she should follow her heart. So she follows her heart into the bedrooms of Steve, Joaquin, Kelsey, and Barbara. She will swear her heart is in Chadwick's car one night and in Raz's office bathroom for months. Later, her heart ends up with Enzo during a girls' trip to Italy. Finally, she will follow her heart down the aisle to Sammy. But

somehow her heart will also speak a special language with a man named Juan Alberto, who incidentally doesn't speak English so well.

30. Miss Vermont wishes she could be cool enough so that she didn't have to be beautiful.

31. Miss South Carolina knows her boyfriend is sleeping with an under-aged girl, which makes her afraid she may catch an STD, but the boyfriend, who she now shares with a teenager, was the first man to encourage her thinking, her whimsical thinking, and even though he's cheating on her, she wants to stay because it's too hard to find someone who loves you for your mind before your body.

32. Miss Mississippi wants to be a high school teacher, but she will need to get a breast reduction first - *this will be intimated by her peers* - because at this rate she's better suited for adult movies and the prepubescent boys in her class won't take her seriously or look her in the eye.

33. Miss Utah understands that her life is easier than her two sisters, who by conventional standards, aren't as lovely as she; a realization that will haunt her forever. The guilt she feels because she was given the good genes will eat away at her until she commits suicide at 39 with a bottle of pills prescribed to her for depression and anxiety.

34. Miss Georgia, for her talent portion, won't get a prize because her talents are too varied; she wrote an original song that she choreographed a dance routine to, a retro jazzy number with tap shoes and a sequined leotard, but she won't win because the judges want someone who they can shoe box in, someone they understand: a singer, a dancer; not someone with too much talent, too much going on.

35. Miss Guam hasn't eaten anything for four days, just water and sugar free Lipton Iced tea. She believes it's totally worth it. After the pageant, she plans on ordering three cheese pizzas all for herself.

36. Miss Kentucky wishes she could be rich enough so that she didn't have to be beautiful.

37. Miss New Mexico has a grandmother, Nana Gloria, who tells her not to separate beauty from goodness.

38. Miss Indiana sleeps on her back because her mother told her, in order to keep her symmetrical face, she shouldn't sleep on her side or, god forbid, her stomach.

39. Miss Delaware will become a Waldorf teacher who leaves bouquets of flowers in her classroom long after their peak because Waldorf teachers believe that witnessing the life cycle of flowers prepares one's psyche for appreciating every stage of life; the aging buds will still look beautiful long after the flowers have withered and hung low, in dullish muted tones, devoid of vibrance, and putrid smelling like a mix of old beef and steaming maple syrup. She will love her flowers in all their phases of grace.

40. Miss Idaho believes that her greatest strength is the ability to lift others up.

41. Miss Maine will raise two daughters; one will be on the spectrum. She will revel in her time with them so much that when she thinks she could die tomorrow from the joy inside of her; a part of her does die, just a little.

42. Miss Florida worked at a Jamba Juice all throughout high school so when she turned eighteen she bought herself breast implants. This is her prized achievement.

43. Miss Rhode Island is being courted by a Mormon boy who brings her gifts from The Hallmark store, mostly stuffed teddy bears with velvet bows around their head and golden

charms around their necks. The presents are an extension of his love since he has a hard time separating gifts and care.

44. Miss Maryland was told her Bat Mitzvah was when she would become a woman, which she translated as losing her virginity and since she didn't have anyone lining up to be with her, she asked a friend, not a good friend but not a bad one either, if he'd do the deed. He said yes, but got her pregnant. She was sent to boarding school that year while she had the baby and got counseling. Now she's fine, but she hasn't felt like having sex since. Now she only wants to win.

45. Miss New York has a hard time separating beauty from age.

46. Miss North Carolina is not afraid to laugh at herself.

47. Miss Nebraska works as a television model. When she turns forty-three her metabolism will plummet, and she will gain eighteen pounds within a year and then twelve more the next year. At forty-five, she will be fired from her modeling job because the camera doesn't lie.

48. Miss North Dakota has a warm smile and infectious laugh.

49. Miss Pennsylvania wants a tattoo that says, "Courage is not the strength to go on; it's going on when you don't have the strength." She may put it in a ring around her thigh.

50. Miss West Virginia has a mom who counts the number of almonds she eats before she eats them one by one.

51. Miss Texas loves watching re-runs of *What Not to Wear* because she's never felt "put-together" enough.

52. Miss South Dakota has a hard time separating beauty from happiness.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote* Our Various States of Beauty *in one of my classes at Rosemont College last semester. Just a little back story, lockdown had just happened in Pennsylvania and I signed up for this class on a whim just to keep my mind focused on something other than the terrifying state of our new world with covid19. The class was called "Pushing Beyond Genre Boundaries" and was taught by poet, Christine Salvatore. Her first assignment was about Beauty. I began, as I always do, writing long-hand in my journal. These thoughts were extremely varied, but no less honest in their representation of what beauty can mean. I saw them tinged with narcissism, bitterness, superficiality, passion, and irony to name a few. A straight essay with a through-line would be impossible, so I decided I'd list them in random order, just like the way they plopped out of my head. I used the free online Random Number Generator to feed me an order. I cross-referenced them with our 52 states. The draft I handed in to my professor was originally entitled, Beauty Pageant, which was the only change I made before submitting it to FOTD.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Watsuki is a biracial woman who was raised in Hawaii by hippie parents. She found her calling in the theatrical arts at a young age performing in schools within the Hawaiian chain. During her twenties she became, among other things, an efficient lettuce farmer, a diligent acrobat, an exceptional cheese monger, and a ruthless art consultant. She is a nontraditional student who, apparently, returns every decade to the hallowed halls of academia as she believes education is the best investment. Her essay, Farming the Social Ladder, is forthcoming in Abstract Magazine. She lives in the Philadelphia area with her family, one ancient feisty guppy, and the cutest dog in the world. She is currently a MFA in Creative Writing student at Rosemont College.