

Why We Look the Way We Do

by Maren O. Mitchell

1.

Illogically, it wasn't the threat of cancer,
 but the fear of change in how I saw my face.
 I lay down, wide awake in spite of 20 shots,
 to be cut layer by layer
 till cancer free. I heard grating
 snips of gristle as the mapped-out
 circle was incised, twisted around
 and re-attached
 to cover the red, wet well in my nose—
 all to the music of Mozart.
 My face blew up for days,
 stitch holes elevated,
 capillaries burst.
 I bought stock in Q-tips,
 whined for 2 months.
 Family and friends pooh-pooed me.
 My husband held my irrational hand.

2.

The blind are not blinded by appearance.
 They see with sound, shape, motion, texture, scent.
 They don't read raised eyebrows
 compressed lips
 laughing eyes
 jutting chin
 flare of nostrils
 flash of snarl.
 They don't admire frame of hair
 color of eyes
 sweep of brows
 tilt of nose
 curve of lips.

3.

1957, our sixth grade teacher introduced us to Stanley
 before he arrived: *He was burned when he was young.*
He's older than you. See him as just another classmate.
 No problem. In more ways than height, we looked up to him.
 Traveling with the speed of a spark,
 Stanley had flowered from a torched child
 into the knowledge of self I still seek.

American soccer prophet, he played ball with his feet,
 wrote with arms ending in neat pink puckers.
 He spoke a close version of our language.
 His full-hearted laughter activated his ascot throat.
 He saw us through slits.
 We were not frightened. We liked him.

4.

As we drove her up, down and around
 to visit us, chased by dementia,
 my mother obsessively looked for herself
 in the car vanity mirror. She was losing
 self too fast. No security
 in seeing the Blue Ridge Mountains she loved. She last saw me
 as one of her sisters,
 all of our names beginning with an "m." In the end
 she re-found me in the face of Angela,
 a caregiver. Named her me.
 Comforted us both.

5.

2004, Jane, two children, two grandchildren,
 shot in the face by her husband.
 Lost one eye, nose, cheeks, mouth, jaw.
 Children ran from her, yelling: *Monster!*
 Had 30 operations: ribs into cheekbones,
 skin from thighs,
 leg into jaw.
 Four years later
 a dead donor gave her a face.
 In two months her hands could not tell
 her new face from her old.
 Now she can walk outside and not be noticed.
 She can drink coffee, eat hamburgers. Doesn't know
 whether to cover trachea, mouth or nose when she sneezes.
 She still loves her husband.

6.

Hostage to appearance,
 we forget the nose is for intake of oxygen, nitrogen,
 exhale of nitrogen, carbon dioxide,
 the bonus lure of strawberries,
 location of loves.

We forget ears need to lean forward
for directions to destinations,
to hear songs of the heart,
the coming of storms.

We forget the mouth should smile,
press kisses,
form sounds to inform, express, translate.

We forget eyebrows, lashes, shield sight.
Eyes see steps to take,
colors that color our souls,
read the eyes of loves.