Her Nose is Different from Her Nose

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Dear Reader,

This essay is an opinion piece containing broad generalizations that are not meant to offend — merely, to show the American perception of race, beauty, and identity from observations I have made as a young adult who was not born in the U.S., but is expected to assimilate into American society. This essay is the recipient of a silver key in the Scholastics Art and Writing Competitions.

Thank you.

*Her Nose is Different from Her Nose*

In a definitive moment in time, we are wont to think that we are ugly. We are not, of course; we are born beautiful with every particle perfectly assembled for success. However, the moment in which we become aware of our “imperfections” can occur at any time in life; it occurred for me the summer I obtained my US citizenship. To be black in America is generally considered bad news because of racism manifested through brutality, economic inequality, and social inequality. For me, however, being black in America meant no longer being African, no longer having that mysterious air about me that had people wondering, “What are you?” in a curious way. Being an American black meant that I had the black *nose*, which was unacceptable because the black nose was not *en vogue* and, to my way of thinking, never would be. After all, the enslavement of minorities is not over, merely changed in form.

I was walking down the stairs of the immigration building on that hot summer day in 2017 with my long-coveted US citizenship certificate in hand when a lady bumped into me. She turned around to say sorry, as one would, and I was *struck* by the wideness of her nostrils. The flesh, which hung from that boneless structure like the layered fat on a piece of ham, seemed to tremble as if the vibrations of the sweet curving mouth irritated it beyond measure. Every death of a cell on that beautiful, deep, burnished honey skin could be observed in the swinging lobes of the nostrils, which flared round and full such that I could all but see her naked soul from the deep moisturized wells.

I did not have to ask to know that this was an African-American. Her nose was not the tender quivering giraffe nose of the African, whose innate curiosity about life was still intact. That same attribute, which in seconds pinpointed this woman (who in truth was very attractive) as an American black was the bars of a prison to who I was, who I am. I’m petrified of being defined so easily, terrified to be understood by a mere glance, ostracized in the sweat of my own vanity as I desperately fight off the notion that I am not different; I am not unique. I want so
much to be extraordinary, so much so that I explained my fear to my sister in our nightly conversations.

“You’re afraid of what?”
“Having a black person nose!”
“What are you talking about?”

I instantly pulled out my phone and Pinterested two women, a Nigerian and an African-American.

“Her nose,” I pointed to the Nigerian woman, “is different from her nose!” The silence which followed was laden with what I thought was my sister’s judgement.

American social structure steeps in standards of unattainable beauty, which are based solely on European values. A woman is, according to these values, beautiful if she is tall, thin, long-legged, big-breasted, long-haired, and above all, white. She is ugly if she is short, plump, small-breasted, big-lipped, kinky-haired, proudly-nostrilled, and above all black. My fear of having a black nose stemmed from the fact that I was afraid of not being unique enough and being too unique, of not being extraordinary enough and being too ordinary, of being misunderstood and understood too quickly, of not being pretty enough, smart enough, kind enough, womanly enough, white enough to be considered the right kind of human.

“Are you afraid of being an American?”

The answer came so abruptly to my mind that I finally understood what true ugliness was. My fears did not really have anything to do with nostrils at all, but rather my “new” identity, by the citizenship award hidden on my bookshelf. As this realization runs over me like an eighteen-wheeler on a busy interstate, my sister asks, “Do you think I look like a triangle?” My silence has the same effect that hers did on me and she stutters to justify herself.

“At the gym, all the girls talk about looking like a triangle, you know, big shoulders to skinny legs. It’s so ugly!”

I turn to look at her, fully in the face. I skip past her domed, perfectly-proportioned, forehead and the delicate arched brows that grace it like a crown. I skip past the thick-lashed eyes, pausing to take note of the lack of bridge on her nose, the shallow roundness of her nostrils and the delicate flaps that cover them, flickering like a prey scenting the air for danger. My sister has the black nose; she looks like an African-American.

“You are beautiful.”