

On Hair

or Cutting the Safety Cords

NATALIE YAHR



WRITER'S COMMENT: *Greg Miller told us that the topic of our final exam was "really wide open." He challenged us to write "speculative narratives" with which we would "lead readers to consider aspects of existence in fresh, unexpected ways." Thus an essay on hair. The confessional nature of this piece made writing it nearly painful. I had something I needed to say, but wasn't sure I was ready to say it publicly. I can't say I'm sure now either, but here it is anyway. Thank you to Michael Smith for continuing the Beauty Conversation in your classroom. And to Greg and Mrs. Jeanne Jelnick: you never let me succumb to inertia or complacency. I have written about feeling stifled and constricted in appearance, but you've both given me freedom of expression. I'm grateful.*



—Natalie Yahr

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *Jorge Luis Borges once remarked, in a conversation about Walt Whitman, that free verse is the easiest kind of poetry to write, but the hardest to write well. In terms of the essay form, I've always felt much the same about autobiographical writing. For this reason, I waited until the end to assign a personal essay in a recent section of Style in the Essay (UWP 18). I had hoped that some of the modes we practiced earlier in the quarter, such as description, reportage and cultural commentary, might enrich the personal speculation in which I was asking students to engage. I cannot take credit for the results of Natalie's essay—she was already a superb writer before she set foot in my classroom—but it's certainly everything I was hoping for as I conceived of the assignment. I'm especially impressed by her subtle combination of tenderness and humor, achieved through an artfully conversational tone that engages readers from the very first sentence. Such qualities were also abundant in Natalie's previous essay, which we workshoped as a class, and*

I'm certain that Natalie's example inspired several students to produce their best writing of the quarter.

—Greg Miller, University Writing Program



COME FROM A LINE OF BEAUTICIANS, women whose arsenals included fancy manicure sets, hair dye and foil. My mother's mother, who, despite conventions of the time, continued to work in her salon after having my mother, had passed away long before I was born, and my step-grandmother had given up her hairdressing job after marrying my grandpa. I never saw either at work, but in the sepia-toned photograph of my grandmother's shop, displayed on the low-shelf of a lit cabinet in my living room, I can imagine her massaging the scalp of a client who sat bracing her neck against the rigid lip of the porcelain shampooing basin. An old cone-shaped hair dryer—the kind that surrounds your head as you sit in the salon hoping aliens have not colluded with beauticians to harness your brain-waves—sat unused in the spare bedroom of my grandparents' home, reminding me that, amidst small talk, friends would cajole my grandmother into giving them free cuts and styles.

In her early teens, my grandmother was thrilled to find a front section of her hair growing in colorless. She must not have known relatives with white forelocks or perhaps she didn't realize they were genetically passed. She assumed that her whole head would soon be prematurely white, but later disappointedly dyed the pale patch to match the unchanging brown of the rest of her hair. That same grandmother confided to my mom that during her pregnancy she prayed to Mary Magdalene to give her daughter beautiful hair. My step-grandmother, despite needing kidney dialysis at the end of her life, continued to drive fifteen minutes into town twice each month to have her color retouched.

I cut my hair short in fifth or sixth grade (I don't remember which). I didn't do it myself—that would come later. I leafed through magazines replete with images of short hairstyles, notching page after page. (How one can produce so many publications about so little hair I still don't know.) I weeded through the dog-eared pages to find the single cut I desired. Confidently I tore the glossy page close to the binding and proudly withdrew that folded sheet from my pocket to show my school friends, before I severed my then-blond locks, the specific version of

beauty I wanted to emulate. I sat in the chair, strands of my hair fell to the floor, and I was never blonde again.

A case of neither hair dye nor immaculate coloration was responsible: age had been gradually darkening my hair for years, causing my step-grandmother to ask if I'd highlighted it. I wasn't even ten. The specialized knowledge of her working days probably overrode her common sense from time to time. A few kids asked if my mom had forced me to wear my hair short and some adults commented that my mom and I looked like twins, clearly not considering how little a preteen wants to hear that she resembles someone forty years older. But aside from those irritations, I remember feeling content with a cut just a couple of inches from my scalp and no need for hair ties.

When I kept my hair longer, every time I'd get a new haircut I'd ask the hairdresser to give me a low-maintenance style. "Oh, this will be so simple for you. Don't worry," each shears-wielder would assure me. It took years for me to learn that what a professional found easy and quick required grand feats of hair care enthusiasm by the standards of mere mortals. Blowdrying, straightening, and curling (oh my!) just stole time I would have preferred to spend sleeping, studying, or gouging my eyes out. Eventually, I discovered that shampooing and conditioning were about as much effort as I was willing to invest. I had little desire to own any electrical device intended to heat my hair into one position or another and told my hairdresser so.

I had given long hair (still short in the eyes of many girls) a second chance to win me, but it scored no points. Hanging damp in the winter, it chilled me, and in the summer, it clung sweaty to my neck. Early in high school, after growing my hair to just above my shoulders, I mentioned that I'd like a shorter cut and still recall a friend cautioning me, "People will think you're a lesbian." I was perplexed. Didn't Charlize Theron, considered by some "the new Marilyn Monroe" and the epitome of femininity, have short hair? At that moment, I could think of nothing to say.

Later, a professional's scissors said it for me: "I don't care. To hell with those people who think that sexual orientation can be measured with a ruler." Besides, I didn't feel like I fit in, so why pretend I did? I felt I should provide some kind of signal to strangers that I might not meet their expectations. And, selfishly, I tried to model my exterior after my interior, to hide nothing, because I wanted a filter from those people

who would find my abnormalities unbearable. Then all of us could waste a bit less time.

Apparently I'm not the only one who believes that cutting hair can have symbolic value. According to Maxine Hong Kingston's retelling of legend, Fa Mu Lan cut off her hair before entering battle disguised as her father. With words carved into her back and later a child-bearing womb under her armor, her feminine frame came to embody the courage and fortitude thought to be unique to men.¹ In the film *White Oleander*, Astrid crops her hair with the same knife that she later uses to threaten the girl who has beaten her at the children's home. Some mistake her gesture for evidence that she's gay, but the boy she later falls in love with soon sees beyond the superficial. For both girls, cutting their hair allowed them to release their most battle-ready selves.

In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, by Betty Smith, young Francie's mom forbids her to cut off her "crowning beauty," but Francie eagerly anticipates becoming "a woman soon": "I want to be my own boss and get my hair cut off if I feel like it."² She feels confined by her mother's narrow perception of beauty and sees cutting her hair as a way to exert some control over her own life.

Maybe I just like faces too much to like long hair. If one has beautiful facial features—and in my opinion, most do—that "crowning beauty" can be a distraction, if not overkill. Why, in a society of creams and razors, waxes and depilatories, a society that teaches girls to remove hair from almost every non-cranial location of their bodies in the name of femininity, is the hair on the head revered? Why is head hair feminine but leg hair masculine? And why do we find hair in our food or hair on our clothing utterly disgusting and yet carry the source so close to our mouths?

I keep my hair short, but not because I doubt the inherent beauty of women. In fact, I trust its presence so much that I refuse to believe it lives solely, or even primarily, in the low-hanging ends of their tresses. I tested my hypothesis that my hair didn't really matter with a scientific approach: I experimented by cutting it off and waited for Armageddon to ensue. It didn't. Instead, I realized I'd been wearing a mask that disguised my maladjustment. As I cut my hair, I lifted the mask. I stand here now bare-faced and satisfied. I wish I knew what my grandmothers would say.



Works Cited

1. Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Random House, 1976.
2. Smith, Betty. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.

