

# South Loop Review

*A Journal of Creative Nonfiction + Art*

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# Shaving My Mother's Head

Andrea Cumbo

It's soft, wispy – the one time the word seems perfect, soft shimmers of silver trailing to the ground. My mother's hair, winding off her head, disconnected, as the razor in my hand skims her scalp the night before her surgery. I'm home, the home where my mother cooked me vegetarian dinners—green beans, mashed potatoes, marinated carrots but no pork chop—during high school and where I had a room, now a sewing room, in the basement. I've come back for this, well, not for this exactly, not for the head shaving. That, I didn't see coming.

Mom's malignant melanoma has recurred; twenty-years after the first time, this spot is a black pool of sickness on her scalp. It looks like a quarter that has sat melting into the pavement of a tar road. How come I never noticed it hidden under those waves of silver?

Awaiting a shave in solidarity, my father sits away, enough away that I cannot feel him, cannot sense him but to see him.

So I stand behind this high-backed dining table chair and shave my mother's head, not bald, but down to a respectable length, something the Marine Corps would approve of. I feel warmth drifting up to my fingertips as I slowly graze each section of her head, careful not to nick the melanoma. The razor—oddly called "Andi's"—rumbles through my fingers, a disconcerting massage. Silver-white strands draft to the tile floor. I breathe slowly, swallowing back the tears.

When I'm done, she looks like a cancer patient. Wise, sad, so sad. She says it looks good.

\*

As is the nature of many memories and family, my mother and I disagree about this one. A difference of where we were standing at that point, I suppose.

I am four, maybe three, and I am stretching to my tip-toes on my grandmother's small pink stool, my head leaning over the bathroom sink. I have picked out a towel—white, fluffy in the way only grandmothers can make things fluffy—now draped over my neck. My head strains forward under the faucet, dripping water stumbles into the thick strands of blond hair. At least this is what I think must have happened first. Wet hair, then cut hair.

In that bathroom, my mother lops off pieces, long locks falling into the sink—scooped up later into the trashcan. She uses scissors, maybe sewing scissors, the ones Granny uses to cut her knitting yarn.

My mother doesn't remember this happening at my grandparents' house. She doesn't remember the sink, the towel, that pair of scissors. She does remember the haircut. She tells me, years later, words I can remember: "It was just too much to take care of, all that thick, wavy hair. You always screamed when I brushed it. So I cut it off."

Memory becomes unimportant in the how. It's the what—a boy-short haircut that will last until I'm in college—that's essential.

✱

My mother has a beautiful, pristine bald spot on her head. She typically covers it with hair, a swath of silver draped just so. But occasionally, when the wind blows across her face, or when she's just awakened from a deep sleep, I can see it. A small patch of emptiness. A glint of light like the way the moon's surface sometimes shines down, even from the craters that we call lakes, the Sea of Tranquility shimmering.

The color of her skin in this patch is that of a beluga whale, white, almost blue white, smooth, graceful. Ivory keys on an antique piano.

After she was able to remove the bandages, after the stitches were gone, absorbed into her body, the scar was cold. They had patched her scalp with skin from her legs, and the cells hadn't easily migrated to their new location. The skin didn't look like it did on her leg—comfortable, at ease. The doctors must have pulled it taught, stretching.

Now, the patch feels warm, beating with blood flowing easily below it, like water. Beneath this wave of hair, this portion of my mother is the most alive.

✱

The real story of Rapunzel, not the Disney version or even the version that the Grimm brothers cleaned up for later editions or higher sales, is about abduction, torture, imprisonment, intrigue, brief hope, long despair, and eventual but not complete resolution. If Rapunzel lived now, her story would make a great CSI:

A beautiful maiden is imprisoned by an enchantress because her loving but foolhardy parents eat some of the witch's beloved rampion, a trespass that requires the relinquishment of the baby girl when she is born. So such stories go.

Rapunzel, for that is what the witch named the girl, is kept in a doorless, stairless tower, with only her long, locks of golden hair as a means of other people's entrance. (Never mind how food arrived for the girl—such things are not the concerns of fairy tales.) We all know the phrase: "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your long hair." The girl would dutifully wrap her hair around a hook, because while naïve she was wise enough to know that having someone climb your hair could be a very painful event, and up would come the visitor, the requisite lover.

And here of course is where things go wrong, as if being trapped in a tower wasn't wrong enough. We watch the scene in our mind's eye, waiting to see the witch appear below, waiting to see if she overhears them, waiting. But no, she doesn't catch them. Instead, Rapunzel says something about her clothes fitting too tightly around the belly, and just like that, the secret's out, Rapunzel's hair is chopped off, and she's sent to live in exile in the desert, where, of course, eventually her young lover finds her and his twin children, and they all live happily ever after—unchanged in persona by all this life. Assumedly, Rapunzel's hair grows back. This is the way things go in fairy tales.

✱

At the hospital on the morning of my mom's surgery, I rub her fuzzy head and take a fuzzy picture of her with my camera phone. I want to capture her with this much hair, her rebel haircut—her decision to take action before action was taken on her. In the photo her face is shining forth below her stubbles of silver hair.

In Chinese medicine, they say that hair reveals the state of your blood. What your hair is your life force is also. These strands that we usually call "dead."

Blood replenishes itself. Scars heal over, warm and smooth. Hair grows back. Except when it doesn't. Except when there's a soft, white crater beneath a shield of silver, a shimmering reminder as bright and alive as an open wound.

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