

SAMSON IN REVERSE

Age fifteen or so I rode Metro
bus G home from school, silver
poles, blue plastic seats filled
with teens, book bags. Stopover
downtown and we made room
up front for head scarves, black
and Hispanic women, children—
One day a woman with no nose

rode, sunlight stuck on the flat
bandage tape. Gold G headed
for Allentown cleared quickly
as middle class Caucasian kids
competed to jerk the cord first.
A teenager's power flows from
cars, clothes, hair; if too young
to drive the latter loom and so

the day I was mistaken for a girl
(worse, called hermaphrodite)
I got off on Eighth Avenue.
It was the early nineties : three
years prior Madonna dressed
as a man, danced atop precipitous
stairs in a *Metropolis*-inspired set.
She grabbed her crotch as steam

spewed, as muscle boys worked,
fought, sweat— one found her.
His grimy hand left a smudge on
the sheet in which she wrapped
her naked body. Then *The Girlie
Show* toured and Madge, in tribute
to Dietrich's recent death, dragged
in full tuxedo, platinum pixie-do

hidden beneath top hat, *Like
a Virgin* sung in deep German
accent, book-ended with *falling
in love again, never wanted to...*
A haircut, then, must matter, a do

as boy as boy could be. I headed up
Eighth Avenue to Broad Street
where narrow porch roofs linked

row homes—a tiny cylinder stood
out on one post, candy cane
in flux : blue white red white blue
spiraling up : Rachiele's barber
shop. My mother had cut my hair
one too many times since I last
came here, and Rachiele stopped
mid-snip when I entered to say

hello, like he always did, his voice
deep and soft beneath a thick
moustache. He wore pleated pants,
tasseled loafers, and tufts of chest
hair peeked from his button down's
open collar. I took a seat against
the wall, perused the magazine-
laden table—I liked space images :

suns and moons and black holes;
or sketches and maps of ancient
cities. I did not find the African
women's breasts awful, but
grew frustrated at camera angles,
how men covered their inch or two.
When finished, Rachiele called
"Next!" and asked "How do you

want it?" as he tucked a white
cloth in my collar and tied a long
body bib around my thin neck.
I wanted it shorter, wanted
the shape of my head to show,
wanted no one to doubt I was all
boy, as butch as Madonna
as Dietrich. Silver eyed scissors

peered from his pocket, leapt
at my head, spoke in accents : *snip-*
squeak, squeak-snip, snip-squeak
and snippets fell, slid down bib—
gold joined gray from the last

customer, red of the man before,
my head light at the sight of the
hairy rainbow. Clippers hummed.

“Look down,” he instructed. His
hand guided my head down, away
from the mirrors. Shaved tufts
tumbled as he sheared sides, back,
and then I flinched as the metal
bit. He wiped off the blood drop,
plucked out a brush to dust nose
and neck. He unwrapped me,

conjured a hand mirror so I could
see how the white scalp shone out
above the red line’s crusty bead,
platelets piling up. Was it my grin,
the satisfied air? An apology? Did
he see the features of my father
and brother emerge, remember
my first time : I pronounced barber

“Barbara” and delighted in a piece
of bazooka bubble gum given
for silence, for sitting still. Years
since he offered that red and blue
wrapper he offered that day when I
paid. I walked home chewing pink
gum, newly exposed scalp cold,
the nick – brief, small – on fire.

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