

## 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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