

ANNA-LOUISE CRAGO

this hair

I

The broad-shouldered butch i have a crush on digs through boxes for her scissors. It's early July and the house-shuffle in-town days. She empties boxes for her scissors. My hair is black to my waist. It is femme, roaring tough baby femme. It is chemical warfare over the hue, the colour of my mane. She cuts one side longer than the other above my shoulders. You should cut it shorter she says. I go by steps that way I don't cry. It boils down to growing up. I don't really want to this afternoon. I could work at a day camp with this hair, I could spill coffee in a cafeteria and people would reach over with napkins, I could lie on my stomach across my bed and wish I were bald. I let her take it off me by the foot because hair is identity and conformity. Cause I like her. Cause it was time my hair was no longer pulled or painfully tangled or used to hurt me.

II

I tilted my head over the last shreddie swimming in a bowl of milk. Newspaper on the floor of a new homely apartment. Brown heavy door onto the plateau. Fruit flies cluster around dirty dishes in a shady sunday-morning room. The barbers and shavers to my circle of friends provide me with bristle beneath shoulder length black hair & light almond roots and the flicker of faith in the existence of the lesbian mafia.

III

I made them stop the shave at my skull's waist. lesbian mafia considered. because Don't do that. Don't do that, anna. (but ma, come on, that's not fair) you can't. to be female & bald in this family is to be losing a battle against time. & breast cancer. Bald mother rocking her bald baby girls. Bald grandmother rocking her bald daughter rocking her bald babies. Seeing as I was/am into this loving-woman deal I shut my eyes and felt the smooth skins and duck-feathery hair on these grown heads and

dreamed that they could ruck and scrum their way into being a rugby player. a dyke. a Tibetan nun. Realities of resistance of the tough&bald&maybe breastless women. Not dying, brushing bones into neat little piles. So I made her stop at my skull's waist. I cannot wade too deep. 16 w or w/o breasts. w life.

IV

I let my mom's hairdresser cut me up. Hoisted on this chair, I felt like a driver until I realized it kept me still. This straight woman offered me lolly-pop bangs and a feathery deal—camouflage. Fuck no. Four hours in a salon convincing myself this was glamour. This isn't even femme like I know it. I'm red orange over white skin. She took away my hair out of convenience. I'm kempt. I pull it back away from my face but it doesn't reach. I slick it and wet it and spit it and it roars its follicle arms back across my face with a demonic charming innocence. Nemesis. It's a mushroom cut from hell. Sporty and pert. I am neither. A far cry from a daring coiffé, a step into myself. Home is beneath this layer. Slivering.

V

Making a bonfire over and on my head. Catching the reds and oranges in my new short hair. Ruffling my flames. It's sweltering hot up here in my attic room. I knot and tease till I have cardboard peaks and waves glaring like the neon strip downtown. Repulsing and attracting strangers. I want to be starchild. A burst of fire cresting over this sizzling tongue. I'm gonna bleed tonight down my thighs and over my knees. It'll boil. This is how I learn my hair. To cook right. Making a bonfire on this head three and four months after someone tried to make a bonfire on me—on this same head. Girl (me) tightened her step 'cause no one ever taught me to cook right till now. It's all about who strikes the match. who twists and ties. Hair's never been neutral say those around me who are proudly Afrocentric.

VI

Hardly ever been neutral myself. From the beginning, I refuse to cut two little braids with blue and green ribbons. they look underfed. I don't pay attention and with time they dread. unevenly. look at 'em girl, you are so white, could be a VanillaIce fan practically. I laugh with her until i'm gonna pee my pants. until they have nothing to do with fashion or function. all that's left is a stomach a cramp and a realization that shit. this is how long my hair would be.

VII

There is an AIDS cut-a-thon and i'm sweeping up hair. to help. I'm seeing these curls and pieces on linoleum. and they look so so dead.

VIII

My mother offered to protect me from the harassment & vandalism I get on my dorm floor for being bi. Then, shetellzme over Scrabble that I've gotten uglier since I came out. shetellzme lesbians are sexual terrorists for making me cut my hair. shetellzme this not anticipating

that i want tocutmyself

that i'm winded

that I sought out some women with scissors so gingerly so they could build a shack over my tender identity. And there I would leave a simple story behind.

histoire d'un homme qui a été séduit par la combustibilité de mes cheveux, histoire d'un homme qui fumait, histoire d'un homme qui m'a demandé si j'étais féministe à Montréal, si j'étais lesbienne aussi. histoire d'une fille de seize ans qui se disait lesbienne car elle avait peur d'être bisexuelle. Histoire d'une fille qu s'est sauvée. Histoire d'une fille qui a oublié pendant quelques mois.

shetellzme this over Scrabble not anticipating

that I will clamp my mouth shut and refuse to crack then spell "OOZE" so the Z (10 points) lands on a triple letter score

IX

My mom,
shelovezme not anticipating

that I will win by 33 points
and some

X

I'm braiding my seventy-four split levels of tites couettes and self into this. I'm carrying strands to each other. Refusing to brush, refusing to look like I deserve my government job at 16, now 17. There is so much power in refusing. So much power in owning a part of your self. in owing yourself, too. & I do owe myself this. *tant que je tiens mes couettes, perdre la tête n'aura plus la même importance.*

XI

Hair is not dead, you know.

Anna-Louise Crago is in the long process of relearning the history of the lands called "canada" and busy being inspired by the writing and words of Patricia Monture-Angus, Dionne Brand and the publishings of Sistervision Press among others. She has an appetite for activism and is presently in a longue et douloureuse lutte contre l'université d'ottawa for the bigotry she suffered at their hands. She is 17.