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May B. Smith English Composition Award

Some people eat to feel comforted, some people shop. I dye my hair. I started when I was thirteen. I had long golden hair that people often admired as if it were a hat I wore. As if it was attractive despite its reluctant attachment to my face. I resented that, and my first bottle of hair dye was a thrilling near-black. The anticipation of the purchase combined with the smell of the processing chemicals and the beautiful gluts of dye washing down the drain made it a perfectly sensual experience.

In high school a bad day would prompt a midnight run to my local Wal-Mart. For three to ten dollars I could buy a new day. When I was a child I would hide candy in my room, to give me something to get out of bed for in the morning. Now I dyed my hair late at night, waking in the morning with a jolt and a dash for a mirror. Friends had bets that I would be bald by graduation. School was terrifying and every anxiety was apparent in my tortured hair. A thoughtless comment from a classmate or a laughing look in my direction would turn my hair to purple blue or red by the next day. I lived with layers of chemicals on my head, collecting pigment like I collected hurt.

My concession to becoming an official adult was to choose more natural colors. I skipped graduation ceremonies, secretly fearing I had not really graduated, but I dyed my hair that night just to celebrate. Over the next few years hair dye would get me through cross-country moves, through relationships and hundreds of bad days. When my mother was coming to visit I would dye, re-dye and bleach so many times in the hours before she arrived that my exhausted strands would refuse to accept any color and become gray. I would wear a hat and allow my mother to pretend that I was still the sunny blonde she liked to think I should have been. One year before Christmas my grandmother offered me one hundred dollars to have my hair

professionally brought back to blonde. But I didn't want to be blonde, so I went home as black as I could get.

And it was with black hair that I discovered the tumor. I didn't want to think about it. But now each time I applied chemical darkeners to my scalp I imagined the outer layers of my brain and its juices becoming tinted with mahogany brown and magenta. The tainted fluids spreading waste throughout my body, potential and actual cancers. I had found the tumor accidentally, and I tried to forget about it. But it was horrible, therefore fascinating. The texture through my skin and the way it wobbled between the tissue and muscle that had a right to be in my body terrified me. I needed no health class slides of dark masses of tumors to understand that this *thing* did not belong in me. Over the next few months I often held it for minutes at a time, as if I could keep it there and stop it from spreading. A line from a hospital drama ran through my mind, "And then the cancer metasized." and I envisioned myself disintegrating into a pile of dusty, moldy gray tumors.

After six months of wondering and trying not to I got up the courage to go to a doctor. But not before my fear had driven me to cut off all of my hair. I wanted to shave my head and find some burlap. My hair was one and one half inches long. It was black. I felt ugly and misshapen, I felt sick and worthless. I have never felt so low in my life, adolescence had nothing on this. But it was this feeling of lowness which allowed me to submit to tests, to unrobings and probings to questions and more tests. In the end I lay back in a small room while a doctor cautiously unwrapped a foot-long needle, as if revealing its length slowly would hypnotize rather than frighten me. He worked it around muscles and bones, gristle and skin as I watched on the black and white screen of the sonogram a nurse held to the spot. It looked like a delicate landing on the moon when the needle reached the tumor. No one looked at my exposed skin or the

rooted antennae jutting out of my side, all eyes were fixed on the porous evil moon and the poised craft. The doctor hit the trigger and the needle popped the question - the hollow steel through the tumor's core. I waited for the answer to that question for the next two weeks.

It was a fibrous tumor, a piece of misplaced purposeless gristle which lives with me today. But it changed the way I thought about my hair. They did not tell me hair dye caused it. They told me possibly nothing caused it. Nothing outside of this polluted world we live in, which lives in us through tainted air and water and countless meals of processed once-food findings. But I bought some bleach, the day after Christmas, the day I found out. I bleached it to the dark blonde I assumed it would be naturally.

Some days I still fight the urge to fix myself with a bottle. I hate being a blonde. I wear more black, as if the color of my clothes can to some extent do what my hair used to – infuse me with confidence. Changes in coloring habits have led to changes in diet and lifestyle, as I continue to become more of what I am - a dull blonde gone out with the dishwater, surrendered to the grass and detoxified in layers of earth. Sand and gravel filters. Maybe someday I'll make it down to the water table, to the stream and the river, to the ocean. And when I get there I will not contribute to the dead zone, but maybe my passing will provide a brief relief for a suffocating life. Then I can be dissolved. Resolved, forgiven.