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Ellen LaFlèche: Two Prose Poems

Ellen LaFleche · Wednesday, July 6th, 2022

Grieving My Hair

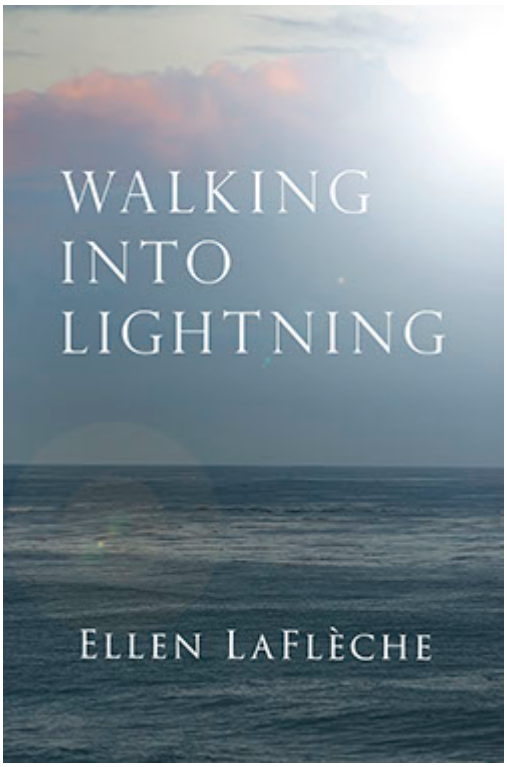
I was a middle woman croning into olden age when I let loose the coil of hair humped againstèmy nape. My hair jumped to freedom, crashed like river-water against the jagged rocks of my spine. I threw out my scissors. Eschewed the beauty salon. Released from its pins, my hair grew and grew. Strands broke through my scalp as if neurons dense with memory were escaping from my brain. My hair too held memory, synapses sparking when I brushed it: the memory of a lover's palm, of my grandmother's beveled mirror, of the holy incense that scented my prayers. Sometimes I braided it, let it swing down my back like a hangman's rope. Mostly I wore it loose against my hips, a crone's silver-threaded shawl, an old woman's protest banner. But then. Oh but then. I was eating egg-drop soup when a nest of hair appeared in my bowl. Awoke one morning to a nest on my pillow. Chemo had killed my follicles, every last one. Day after day, hair detached from my head. Took with it the memory of hiking up a mountain, of sunrise blushing against my sheets, of ocean salt scalding my scalp. How to look into the mirror and say out loud: I am a woman balding? A woman whose milk ducts could kill her. I wept, hair and water rolling downslope together. But then. Oh but then. It took months and months but my hair came back. Came back hysterical with curls, a knotted tangle of rhizomes. Grew back rich with remembering, synapses glowing with the memory of some wild-haired ancestor. My hair sparks in the sun, in front of my grandmother's beveled mirror, sparks when I brush it, one hundred strokes, one hundred more.

A true fairy tale
– or –
if not for my grandmother's magic scissors I wouldn't have been born

Once a girl named Annette worked in a cotton mill, spinning cotton into corporate profits. Annette's hands jumped like hoppy toads from bobbin to bobbin to bobbin. A black braid slid down her back, a thick snake curving down a tree trunk. Annette, almost 17, was heading fast into old-maidenhood. Nights, she heard flapper music floating from the neighbor's piano: sound traveled like smoke through the tenement building. Who knows what possessed Annette on the night before her 17th birthday to stand in front of the mirror and Rapunzel herself? Annette, she grabbed her scissors and sliced off her braid. The scissors took on a life of their own, snipping and snipping until Annette's hair settled into a sleek, perfect bob. The mirror saw how the haircut sharpened Annette's cheekbones and uplifted the tired line of her lips. The next day at the mill, three old woman cackled as they stirred vats of dye. Understand, Annette was first in the village to

cut her hair. She cut off her crown, said the first old woman. Nobody will marry her now, said the second. And the third: An old maid for sure. Enter the Frog Prince. The workers called this young man Frog because he'd come down from French Canada in a horse-drawn carriage. The Prince, his name was Luc. In his loudest voice he asked Annette to join him that evening for a stroll through the village. You know the ending. Annette, she married the prince. They lived (somewhat) happily ever after. Life was was no royal ceremony: double shifts at the mill, the Great Depression, food rations, hardened arteries, ears ruined from the incessant roar of the looms. Not to mention, the usual squabbles and the work of raising their children. I am the oldest grandchild. On my nightstand Annette's magic scissors wait for me to sharpen its blades.

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Walking Into Lightning by Ellen LaFlèche

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