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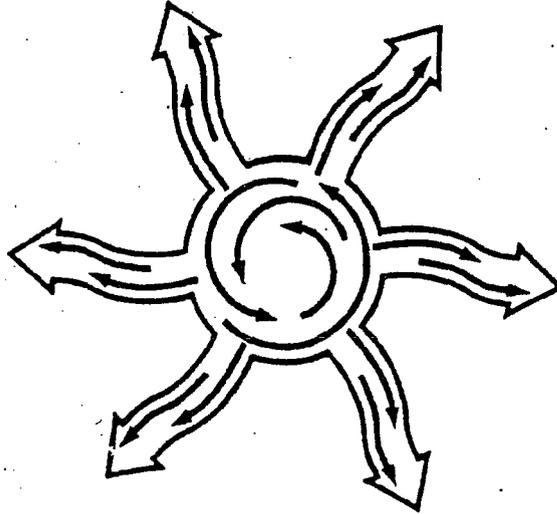
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UNDER THE SUN

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*An essay is a short piece of prose
in which the author reveals himself
in relation to any subject under the sun.*

J.B. Morton

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For My New Hair Stylist

Doyle Wesley Walls

Hair has body. Hair defines the spirit of every age. My hair has a mind of its own. There is no greater story than the story of hair. If you are to be my hair stylist, I will have to assume you believe this.

Read the bumps on my head the first time you wash my hair. They should tell you something worth knowing about my origins, my identity (as it is, currently), and my destiny.

When I was a senior in high school I went on a long car trip through New England with my family over Christmas break. A Saturday found us on the road coming home to Texas. We would arrive late Sunday night. School would begin again that Monday. I let it slip from the back seat that the principal had said he wouldn't let me return to school without a haircut. I'd beaten the system, or so I thought. My father pulled over in West Memphis, Arkansas, on a Saturday afternoon and found the one barber pole. In the chair, I gave my elaborate instructions, a complicated mixture of terminology and hormonal pride, involving, I'm sure, though I couldn't have understood it then, the reaction of the girls to the Beatle haircuts when I was leaving grade school, and the way young women reacted to hair in an age when sexuality was being discovered for the first time. The old barber with no hair nodded. Well, he nodded more in the direction of the TV in the corner where a bowl game was playing. Perhaps that explains the chili bowl haircut my father paid for in a minute and I lived with for a couple of months. I have read about a man who sued his barber for psychological damage. That barber better hope I don't get called for jury duty. And he'd better not be from West Memphis, Arkansas.

None of those damn hair sprays. Snip any curl that might tend to make me look effeminate; save any curl that might proffer the suggestion that I am a wild sexual dynamo, a Dionysian powerhouse of the erotic realm.

As a senior in high school (will I ever get out of that place?), I was summoned to the vice principal's office one morning during the middle of my art class. My sideburns, I was to learn, had galloped a quarter of an inch too far down the side of my face for me to remain in school. Too much of a weight for the brain, I suppose. Need I say this? We had a dress code. I had two choices: go home suspended,

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ready to face the ire of my parents for failing to recognize the importance of my schooling over the insignificance of my hair, or head downstairs to the boiler room to use the rusty razor kept there for the criminals guilty of infractions such as the one I had committed. There was no shaving cream; there was no hot water. Back in my art class, my fellow students were learning all about "perspective."

Do not shave me in any fashion.

As a graduate student in an English Literature and Language program, I entered an elevator on the seventh floor one day to find that I was about to ride down to the ground floor alone with the director of graduate studies for the English program, an extremely erudite scholar. He looked at me as I entered and said right away that I was looking "hirsute." My hair was long, and I had not shaved for a couple of weeks; my T-shirt, even tight as it was at the neck, could not hide my chest hairs. Before the director of graduate studies and I had reached the fifth floor, I confessed ignorance of the word "hirsute." That was probably a record; most graduate students I knew would have pursed their lips, nodded, looked down, and burned the word into their memory to look up later. "Hairy," he replied. "Ah, yes," I said, pursing my lips, nodding, and burning the word into my brain to look up later.

A fellow graduate student came up to me one day and asked where I got my hair cut. He said my hair always looked good and his always looked like crap. His disgust with himself was evident. He wasn't long for the program.

Not one of us sees himself objectively, of course. I, for example, can't get my sideburns even without work. Because I'm right-handed, my sideburn on my right side usually dips down too far on the side close to the right ear. (Does this sound too self-obsessed?) It's easier for my right hand to cross and even-up the sideburn on the left side.

One of my testicles hangs lower than the other. One of your breasts hangs lower than the other. But my eyes and ears are fairly level, so let's go with that standard, even if it's not human.

I work hard to maintain my equilibrium. Please do your part.

Remember this: when Nietzsche wrote that he avoided all systematizers because "the will to a system is a lack of integrity," he wasn't referring to hair stylists.

And speaking of Nietzsche, who gave us the Overman, when I first started getting my hair "styled," as opposed to merely having it "cut," I was six foot six. There have been sultry Delilahs here and there

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along the way to cut me down to size. I remember the first time a young woman laid me back to wash my hair and then proceeded to massage my wet head, then my neck, then my shoulders until another woman came in to cut my hair. I couldn't do anything the rest of the day.

Don't cut my hair to a part. I don't want a part. I don't want the responsibility of having to search for a part you've thought you've found and then cut my hair to it.

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; neither do I have the role of an attendant lord. Shall I part my hair behind? John Updike has, to judge from recent photographs, been experiencing some hair loss, but he had an essay in *The New Yorker* in November of 1992 entitled "Hostile Haircuts." He's been in that magazine more times than I have hairs on my head—and I have a full head of hair! Now for many reasons I'm an Updike fan, though I wasn't much impressed with that hair piece. Marcia Aldrich's essay "Hair" in *Northwest Review* (collected in *The Best American Essays 1993*) is beautifully written; I recommend you read that if you want to brush up on the subject. And you should also curl up with the account Malcolm X gives in his autobiography on having his hair "conked." I wish I had written that piece by Malcolm X, but I can't be something I'm not. And I'll not wear a toupee.

Diane Ackerman gives some scholarly background about hair in her book, *A Natural History of Love*. I recall the gorgeous, sensual photo of her on *A Natural History of the Senses*. When I saw her being interviewed on television by Charlie Rose, I was disappointed to see that those long, swirling curls that cascaded down the side of her head in the photo were short tight curls in the interview. Having immersed myself in her glorious *Senses*, I couldn't understand why she would have changed her hair to that style.

On a trip to see my parents, I once saw my mother walk into the den with her hair, which is usually coifed at a beauty parlor, simply pushed back. I complimented her on it, said it looked beautiful that way, said she should keep it that way. She protested by saying that she hadn't had a chance to fix it, that she wouldn't be leaving it like that with nothing done to it. Unfortunately, I blurted out that she should keep it that way because that hair style took ten years off her age and added twenty points to her IQ. This kind of comment, of course, is what a son says when his age is greater than his own IQ. But there was some truth to the statement, I dare say in print. In my

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own case, a shorter haircut makes me look younger too, but too young. But with long hair I also look too young. When I grow my beard out I look like a geezer: when I was eighteen a nurse in our university infirmary told me I looked like her grandfather. I can't win.

Would listening to longhair music—Johann Sebastian Bach, for example—give my hair more control?

The seasons have changed. That's why I'm here. I'm not looking for a haircut to change my life, just prolong it.

One Friday, in my English composition class, one of my students told us all something she'd just heard in her previous class—that a man's facial hair grows faster when he increases the frequency of his sexual activity. No one was willing to believe it. I had plans to wear a long fake beard to class on the following Monday, but since I didn't know where to find one, I figured it would just be easier to have lots of sex ^{over} on the weekend. I did, but I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary about my beard by Monday, though the circles under my eyes were darker than usual and I was smiling a little more than usual for a Monday morning.

How do you feel about angel hair pasta? Do you think of it when you look down upon the heads of young children with tousled hair?

My elder son is now fifteen. His hair, yawn, is his palette. He must play out the creative urge there as tons of teen-agers before him, including me, have done. When he began making noises about dyeing his hair red, we pleaded with him not to damage his hair in any fashion, though we also were against this move for aesthetic reasons. Why look bizarre instead of better? Finally, he decided to cut his long mane himself to a very short style. I was pleasantly surprised when this worked. It looks really good, though I'm not impressed by what I consider the old hat Sid Vicious spikes he's able to create with only a bar of soap. But I am impressed with what he's done, and it's not just the look—it's the courage. He really doesn't seem to give a damn what anyone else thinks (I admire that), and he still manages to look damn good wearing his hair the way he wants to wear it (I can give up on this dream). I may be giving my son too much credit. He has grown up in a completely different era in terms of a hair aesthetic. It's so easy for him, being his age, to sit in front of MTV and shout "Wuss!" at a prettified Jon Bon Jovi. Cindy Crawford's hair isn't the focus of more attention from specialists than Jon Bon Jovi's hair.

One other event swayed me to rethink my hair style. I made a 33-

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minute video with a student of mine for a contract class he took from me as a senior. He and I acted in this video we conceived and wrote and directed and edited and finally titled *The Silence of God (with Supermodels)*.

In our early discussions, I told Chris that I would do this only if I could be in charge of 51% of the editing. But he, too, I told him, would also be in charge of 51%. In other words, we would both have to agree on the content and style or the scene under debate was out. If either one of us wanted something cut, then it would be cut. This concept would provide complete artistic control to both of us, I argued. And the concept worked, in part, because we two think a lot alike and respect each other's vision. My stipulation was there not only because I like to make art and am full of opinions, but because I wanted to have complete say over my likeness on the tape.

As it turned out, there was an absolutely hideous shot of me early in the video, and it was especially horrific because my hair looked ridiculous: I had either washed it and skipped drying it with a hairdryer that morning ("styling it," for Christ's sake) or hadn't had time to wash it that morning (horror of all horrors). Chris had come up with this particular scene, and I could see his point. I set up the shot myself, but still I was uncomfortable—and I was certain when I saw the tape that I could see in my awkward body movement an attempt to adjust for the way I imagined my hair would look on the tape. (How much does a psychiatrist charge per visit?) This scene that so offended me we fixed—at my insistence and with Chris's knowledge of editing—by placing a black matte over the visual and keeping my vocal track; then we added subtitles over the black. The viewer hears me say the following about the video we're making: "I don't give a damn who sees it. As long as I like it. That's all I care about. Let's make something that pleases us." The viewer reads, simultaneously, these words: "The opening of Doyle's introduction has been masked for reasons of his vanity. He doesn't like to think he looks like this, but a 'devastating' profile is forthcoming." Clearly, I did care who was watching. We were able to save me from public humiliation—indeed, my wife and elder son agreed with me that those few seconds of me were not me at my best—and advance the general theme of the video which concerns the nature of looking, of seeing images, especially the role of the image of the female on screens of all sorts and for reasons from advertising to art.

For me, one of the most enlightening aspects of making the video

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was this: no matter how good a shot of me we happened to show, it wasn't much to shout about even when it was me at my best. And in case you've been dozing off, please pay attention here, because this really is where you come in as my hair stylist. I stop when I find the moment I want to remember when I'm surveying my face in the mirror. If I stand there long enough, I can fool myself into thinking that people are going to see me just like that. But, in fact, people are always moving. I can't control their eyes the way I can control what they see in a still photo. I am not always where their heads are. So you, as my hair stylist, must cut my hair with that in mind. You are an artiste, not some barbarian scalping new recruits. I'm talking to a kindred spirit, *n'est-ce pas?*

I can't get my head straight until my hair looks right. Don't kid yourself: this stuff is more important than most mature people would like to think it is. In 1972 Mick Jagger epitomized the sexual swagger of rock gods who fed their ravenous appetites by touring the countryside and enjoying more maidens than any prince had ever imagined. His thick, wild, long hair was as much a part of the show as "Brown Sugar." Jagger defined sexual excess for at least one generation. But a decade later, in the video for the song "Undercover of the Night," Jagger had a haircut that, a friend of mine astutely observed, made him look like Barney Fife. I hated to hear the comparison, but it was true. How the mighty had fallen.

On the heels of my son's experimentation with his hair and on the heels of the video I made with Chris, I took the plunge. Not all the way, though. But I did go into a hair salon and give instructions for a cut unlike any cut I've had since I was a freshman in high school. (I got a good look at myself—and at the me other people have grown accustomed to seeing—and I figured, "Hey, if I really look that bad, then what difference could it possibly make how I cut my hair?") Considering the fact that I've just turned forty-one, this was a radical change for me. But I do tire of having to deal with the "flipping out" stages of my hair: when it flips out over my ears I feel like an airplane; when it's long in back it curls out in such a way that one might assume I spent the morning trying to achieve that very look with Dippity-do. I was fed up with all this nonsense, including a hand-held hair dryer to dry the thick mop of hair and bring it towards something approaching control in the mornings after washing my hair in the shower. I was fed up with looking like some unwashed relic who was truckin' to a Grateful Dead concert, or, even

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worse, after having washed and dried my hair, looking like some all-too-slick, disco-going dance king who was headed to a BeeGees concert. The phrase "a regular businessman's cut," as the stylist called it even as she began clipping, should have alerted me, but it was too late. I told her specifically that I did not want to leave looking like a neo-Nazi. I did, however, leave looking like a Marine.

Now here's the kicker. Once my hair was cut, one former student, a young man who practically shaves his head, told me my haircut looked good. I got the same comment from another male student who shaves his head. It's streamlined, it's in, it's low maintenance. That's fine, but, really, who cares? Men are not the real test. After having seen me earlier that morning in a large meeting, a female colleague walked out of her way to my office to tell me how disappointed she was that I cut my hair. "The way you had it," she said, "was so poetic." (Immediately, I recalled a meeting with colleagues the previous week which she and I also both attended. At a break in the proceedings, she leaned over and lightly stroked my five-day growth of beard and smiled without saying a word.) "I feared," she told me days after the haircut, "that you would start wearing a baseball cap backwards like some of my male students who sit in the back row and frown."

I understand what she's talking about when she says "poetic." I believe, for example, that her long hair is "lyrical." But she's female. In my book, women can look beautiful, so I believe the time spent on their hair is productive; since men don't count, for me, in this category, time spent "doing" or "styling" their hair is a waste of time. Perhaps this won't seem sexist if I explain that feminine beauty, actual physical beauty, is worth more to me than anybody's "truth" or any other kind of "achievement." For men, then, all the fuss and bother is merely vanity; for women, it is yet another zone of the beautiful in which they can create. And that's a burden. As Kathleen Gonne pointed out to Yeats, women must labor to be beautiful. But as for the assessment in the word "poetic," I suppose I was thinking that I might try to spend more time per day writing poetry than blow-drying my hair. Fear of embarrassment might make me less of a public man on campus, help chain me to my office desk where I might compose. Perhaps, ultimately, that might make me look more poetic in the eyes of the public that matters most to me—female and male readers of poetry, maybe even a bigwig reviewer someday.

My department chair always seems disappointed when I cut my

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hair: with longer hair, she tells me, I look like John Keats. I recently visited the house Keats lived in when he was at Hampstead, and there I found a bust of Leigh Hunt by Joseph Durham. It is Leigh Hunt I look like with long hair, the lesser poet of the two, not John Keats. At Keats's House, I saw a gold brooch in the form of a Greek lyre, with the strings made of Keats's hair; this was to be a gift to Fanny Brawne, but was never given to her. I saw some of Fanny Brawne's hair at the house, too. Leigh Hunt acquired a lock of John Milton's hair and wrote a poem about it: "On a Lock of Milton's Hair." Here is the second and last stanza of that poem:

There seems a love in hair, though it be dead.
It is the gentlest, yet the strongest thread
Of our frail plant,—a blossom from the tree
Surviving the proud trunk;—as if it said,
Patience and Gentleness is Power. In me
Behold affectionate eternity.

Hunt suggested that Keats write about Milton's lock of hair, and Keats did so in "On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair." Just a lock of Milton's "bright hair" challenged the young Keats to become more philosophic, to strive for a greater depth.

Please forgive me this additional extension. At the house where Charles Dickens lived, I saw a lock of his hair. But when I think back on my recent trip to London, and on Charles Dickens, I think of the exhibit in The Museum of the Moving Image that mentions that great novelist. The possessive apostrophe on the sign in The Museum of the Moving Image is in the wrong spot: the sign says "Dicken's," not "Dickens'" as I have it on my shelf written by Angus Wilson or "Dickens's" as I see it in the 4th edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. To be "Dicken's," the name would have to have been Charles Dicken. Now "Dickens'" or "Dickens's" may be up for debate; but "Dicken's" is just clearly wrong. That apostrophe in the wrong spot is something like that errant curl I reach over during dinner to whisk away from the eyes of my younger son, Jacob. You can believe that I pointed out the error to one of the people on the staff in the museum. If I could have combed the black curl sitting atop the great author's name over to the other side of the smooth head of the "s" myself, I would have done so gladly. Perhaps the people at the home of Keats and the home of Dickens have it right. My post

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cards from both places confirm what I recalled reading while I was visiting those sites: it's Keats House and The Dickens House—no apostrophes at all. This is akin to having one's head shaved: there will be no bother about the curly apostrophes and s's.

A male colleague told me he considered the way I had my hair before I cut it more "literary." What stereotypes do we hold about the way poets look? Now here's a dangerous precedent. Does Adrienne Rich look like the great poets of the tradition? In the sense that she's not a male, no, right off the bat, she doesn't look the part. Does Carolyn Forché look more poetic because she looks like a model—or is she less likely to be accepted as a poet because she looks more like an ingénue? I read a reviewer who attacked Forché simply for the photo of her on the cover of her second book, *The Country Between Us*: too much soft focus. I heard Forché say she had been criticized by some for looking like a *Playboy* playmate. In 1984 I heard Sharon Olds begin a poetry reading by telling the audience that most people expect her to show up looking like the dramatic 1980 photograph Thomas Victor took of her which appeared on the back of her first book, *Satan Says*. And beyond what a poet looks like, aren't we also goose-stepping dangerously close to preconceived notions about poetry too? Once in graduate school I showed a poem to a very well-read fellow student. It wasn't a poem by me; it was something out of *American Poetry Review*. He read it, handed it back to me, and said, "Yes, that's how I expect a poem to behave." To behave? I resented the insinuation: poets must write poems that know how to behave. Robert Bly criticized James Dickey for calling for poems that knew how to behave in the drawing room. Well, I digress. If I were to grow some mutton chops I'd look like Matthew Arnold. I guess those face-broadening, simian sideburns would set me apart from the philistines.

Reflections from the glass covering the work of art often make us adjust our position so that we can view the art itself and not the reflections. But in the Tate Gallery, in a room full of Picasso etchings, I recently discovered something most agreeable that I had never considered before. I could check my hair as if in a special mirror made by Picasso for people like me: with my own face reflected among the distorted faces he drew, I came off looking relatively human. Art can do wonders for the soul.

Jesus Christ, the history of art tells us, had hair somewhat long and soft, with a delicate beard. Does this help feminize him and sepa-

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rate him from his father, the bristly God from the Jewish Bible? How might the Sermon on the Mount have been different if Jesus had sported a crew cut?

Blessed are those who see a tax collector and go kick his ass. Thou shalt not be like those damn hypocrites who make me want to puke. Straight is the gate, you wuss, so you'd better take some more locks of hair off the side.

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished and many of them bruised, for he taught as someone who had the authority of a strong upper cut.

I shall grow my beard. That will be a quick way of putting some hair back on my head. Since I am nowhere near balding, I can take heart in the fact that my hair will grow back. I suppose some bald men would enjoy facing such dilemmas. One woman who works in the mail room was shocked when I told her I almost shaved my head. I didn't, of course, but I told her this to make my hair appear longer than it is. She is married to a bald man. She just couldn't understand why I would do this.

Why can't I cut my lawn this severely—one cut to last all summer? "Heads are ugly," one female student told me. "People are better off with as much hair on their heads as possible." Then again, I just ran into a former student, a female, who smiled a beautiful smile and told me she really liked my new cut. I dropped, gratefully, to my knees on the floor before her. After I took a seat, we talked a bit and then she let down her hair from the clip that was holding it up on the back of her head. A new gorgeous cut fell and framed her face. She explained that she took a videotape of Jennifer Aniston, currently starring in the NBC sitcom *Friends*, to her hair stylist and asked to have her hair cut like that. I figured some people took photos to their hair stylists, but I had never heard of videotape. The hair stylist told my student, who was somewhat shy about having brought in a videotape, that customers often brought in videos, especially from soap operas. Perhaps we'll all soon be getting our hair cut through computer software. The "undo" function would be a god-send after any hellish cut was done.

I thought I had cut my hair so short it couldn't possibly misbe-

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have. Now I remember that the back of my head is full of crowns and needs weight to make it settle down, I'm a knave and a king. Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes of wayward, clipped hairs of royal origins. If only I had a slouch hat to pull over them.

You have magazines in the waiting room which picture the hippest hair styles. I suppose some men come in here and show you a picture of some pretty boy and ask for that style. You can forget all that. Look across a field of high cotton in the heat. Light up a vanilla cigar in Mexico City after a dinner of enchiladas. Touch my son's arm when he's the winning pitcher. Listen to Stevie Ray Vaughan sing "Texas Flood." Taste the red beans with diced ham at Vitek's in Waco. That is how I want my hair cut.

Light should hit my hair and hover in a nimbus. I commit my body into your hands. Do for me whatever you can do with your various blades this side of cosmetic surgery.

Seen any good movies lately?