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My Grandmother's Hair

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My Grandmother's Hair · Joan Swift

She wanted to arrive in heaven with beautiful hair,
coppery glow, chestnut haloes of rectitude.

Milking the cows at dawn, she felt yesterday's
braids rocking against her cheeks, her head bent,
the pail giving back its metallic song.

So when they brought her home dead from the Blossburg hospital,
my mother brushed down from the cold scalp for hours.
Hair fanned out like a brown waterfall over the gray end of the coffin.

Lifting the head was hardest, to stroke each strand
and twine it in place.

She combed by kerosene lamplight.

When morning came and neighbors to the parlor door,
three circles shone on my grandmother's head.

Pink roses lay on the gray velvet,
each one letting a curl of pink ribbon down
with another rose knotted at the end. . . .

Kiss her goodbye, my mother said.

The stool was dark and embroidered.

When my lips touched the rigid cheek,
the finest of hairs, the little unmanageable wisps near the hairline,
brushed my face.