

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 17

December 2008

Dressing Heads

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Recommended Citation

Brimhall, Traci (2008) "Dressing Heads," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 17.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol7/iss2/17>

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Brimhall: Dressing Heads

DRESSING HEADS

Traci Brimhall

I pull my comb through a dead man's hair, a kettle steams
on the stove, two lamps light the low room.

The woman to my left

washes the sanguine collar from a severed neck, conceals bruises
starred like sakura on his jaw. On my right, a woman draws an awl
through an ear,

attaches the wooden name of an enemy dead. Heads rest
on their spikes; a quiet congregation. We smoke their slack skins
with incense, make them

smell like sandalwood, like forest beds. I hold
the face of a new warrior. Cutting the cord of his topknot,
his hair falls

into my lap like unspun silk. I twist it around my wrists,
keep him still while I tie him up again. Did he spend his short June
nights in the grass

catching fireflies, sliding his hand into a kimono
to tickle a girl's shins? Did he feed her litchis? Imagine her
fragile collarbones?

I caress oil into his temples, rub his razored cheeks,
open his mouth to darken the dye on his teeth, and when the other women
aren't looking, I finger

his tongue. My hand in his mouth: white, startling. I understand
the dead better than the living. The ugliest places on our bodies feel
the most pleasure

because they're the loneliest. I push the corners of his mouth.
I pinch his insensitive lips. Our first kiss.
Our first loneliness.