American Life in Poetry
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BY Kwame Dawes

Poets often have the insight to see, in a single detail or feature, a complex universe of meaning. Melissa Johnson, in "Mama's Hair", fixates on an ordinary detail of our lives—the hair that we carry around as extensions of our skins—to tell a tender and painful story about the relationship between a mother and a daughter. Contained in this small pocket of verse are moments of care, regret, guilt, humor, tenderness, illness and hurt that are all triggered by a meditation on hair.

Mama's Hair
by Melissa Johnson

Heavy, slick-straight, black as coal,
Mama’s hair could be pulled
over the headrest as she drove,
gathered and stroked in the back seat.

When she cut it, I thought
it was my fault, maybe she told me so.
Every year she went shorter.
It never passed her nape again.

The last time she reached out to me,
she mimed clipping my curls with scissored fingers, her mouth determined
as I leaned to lift her back to bed.