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I'm Tracy K. Smith, and this is the slow down

00:24

hair. When and how did it come to mean so much about who we are. Hair signals beauty, individuality, conformity, flair, vigor, sexual prowess, modesty, and who knows what else, his hair, a marker of identity, simply because it grows out of the top of our heads. And what's up with our hair continuing to grow after death. Maybe Samson was on to something, maybe our most vital essence lives in our follicles. And I haven't even said a word about black folks hair, which is a world unto itself with its own privileged vocabulary. I'd call the realm of black hair, an inner sanctum. You're either born there, or granted access because you've earned someone's trust. And let's just be clear, that kind of a guest pass can be revoked at any time. When I was pregnant for the second time, I got the longing to feel someone's hands, working my hair into tight rows. I want it to be looked after, groomed, made presentable. I missed the way my mother used to lie me down on the kitchen counter to wash my hair. Then sit me on the floor between her feet to comb, part oil and arrange it. So I did the next best thing. I went to an African braiding shop and got myself some long extensions. It took all day, sitting there was painful and tedious. It was also a comfort like few others. Today's poem, hair by Clarence major is like an encyclopedia of hair lore. It helps explain to me why my mother sometimes used to set fire to the loose strands she pulled from her comb. major's poem even sheds a glimmer of light upon one friend's description of hair that falls below a woman's waist, as, quote, pathologically long. The myths, superstitions wives tales and wisdom making up this poem also evoke a generation of women who are mostly now gone. My mom and her sisters would have grown up sitting at their feet, listening to stories about the way things used to be. Hair by Clarence major. In the old days, hair was magical. If hair was cut, you had to make sure it didn't end up in the wrong hands. Bad people could mix it with, say

the spit of a frog or with the urine of a rat, and certain words might be spoken, then horrible things might happen to you. A woman with a husband in the Navy could not comb her hair after dark. his ship might go down. But good things could happen to my grandmother through a lock of her hair into the fireplace. It burned brightly. That is why she lived to be 101 my uncle had red hair. One day it started falling out. A few days later, his infant son died. Some women let their hair grow long. If it fell below the knees, that meant they would never find a husband. braiding hair into cornrows was a safety measure. It would keep hair from falling out. My aunt dropped a hairpin it meant somebody was talking about her. Birds gathered human hair to build their nests. They wove it around sticks, and nothing happened to the birds. They were lucky. But people

04:44

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