

Contralto

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

—in memory of Nancy (Duffie) Furner (1946-1992)

In the interval after the mastectomy
before her head was a slick white egg,
she would color the gray roots of her dark
blanket-soft hair with drugstore dye.

The scar wrapped around her torso like
a hieroglyphic, and the damaged muscle
made it hard to reach above her head.
Heather, who inherited her mother's rich

multi-hued mane, would help. It became
a monthly ritual: the two shoehorned into
the peach flashcube bathroom, mother sitting
on the toilet lid, a towel hugging

her shoulders, peeling the thin disposable gloves
from off the printed guide, and then her girl
gingerly applying the dye, soothed of worry:
get the roots, the black will wash away

from face and ears, the measled walls. Though
she still sang with the Tabernacle Choir,
she didn't sing glop-headed in the bathroom,
but laughed her prosperous contralto laugh,

her abrupt rollicking resonant laugh,
every time the first shock of cold
splashed her neck. And the black foam puddle
in the sink, spilling what seemed like a rainbow.