

Returning to What's Natural

Amelia Baxter-Stoltzfus - New York, New York

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I believe in semi-permanent hair dye: The kind that lets you have a few wacky purple-headed weeks in the depressing months of winter term, but leaves you plain and brunette again in time for graduation pictures. The kind that lets you be whoever you want without letting go of how you got there. The kind that lets you embrace those internal contradictions that make up an entire, oxymoronic, complex, complete human being. I believe in hypocrisy, just a little.

Semi-permanent hair dye is about finding security within unlimited freedom. It's about recognizing what I have in my life and holding on to it, even if only at the base of a follicle, because I also believe in roots.

My mother always tells me that the hair color you're born with is the one that looks the best on you, and I want to make sure that there's something inside of me that's always going to be worth returning to. Maybe the house I lived in with my parents will never be home for me again. Maybe I'll fall out of touch with people I thought I was pretty close to in high school. Maybe I'll hate the way a darker brown washes me out. But I'll know that in 20 to 26 washes, I'll come back to something that I've had naturally forever, and I'll know it looks pretty good.

Here's where the hypocrisy comes in. Every time you get away from home, thinking how you're going to reinvent yourself, you end up hanging on to the things about yourself that are the most familiar. Feeling safe isn't about setting limits on the outside. It's about hanging on for dear life to what's on the inside, no matter how your context changes. Because, honestly, you'll never know whether you look fantastic as a redhead unless you've tried. What you will know is that you have brown to return to, when you're ready.

I've just moved into my first apartment all on my own, and New Jersey has never felt so far away. But this new independence could only come from dependence, from knowing that there are unshakable things in my life that have made me ready to face all the Big Bads in the world. We can't be toddlers or teenagers forever, and there's too much out there to experience to make me want to dwell too much in the past. So I do believe in permanent change; just not for my hair.

Amelia Baxter-Stoltzfus wrote her essay when she was still in high school in Princeton, New Jersey. She graduated from the University of Chicago with a degree in anthropology. Since then, her hair has been black, red and purple in addition to her natural brown.