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"Snow Kissing Aspens" by Susan Gottlieb

Welcome to our Fiction section!

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Death, Be Not Proud

By Terin Tashi Miller

It struck him as his wife sat in her chair at home, the glider he'd bought her as a present when she was pregnant. She sat in her chair, her sad, dark-circled, Italian eyes open but glazed, focusing on nothing in front of her. That night, his daughter had died. His wife had held her stiffening, edema-swollen body, tears falling on the infant's unchanged visage, on the blue eyes swollen shut that had been the genetic gift of the favorite Italian grandmother for whom she'd been named.

After the nurse offered to "bag" the infant - resuscitate her until her lungs and heart failed yet another time - one last time, and asked if it would help or only postpone and prolong the child's suffering, they turned off the urgently alarming monitors to which she'd been attached since her birth by emergency C-section four months earlier.

They knew well what their daughter's heart monitor said. They were too familiar with the monitor showing their daughter's frequent desaturation of oxygen.

His wife, in the room where they'd brought their little girl's body, washed and clothed the baby with a nurse's help. She was clothed in a pink suit a friend had sent during the brief period of pregnancy when everything seemed to be all right. They had boxes and closets full of clothing for their daughter.

As he sat in the living room of their new house, bought just before the emergency C-section that resulted in the two months' premature birth of their daughter, in separate chairs, he remembered the first time he'd seen anything die.

He'd been around three years old. His family was living in Darjeeling hill district. He was in the back of the hotel's restaurant, sitting in the open back door on a step. It was fall-like weather, crisp and gray with occasional glimpses of sunlight. The gray street behind the restaurant was wet from a pot from the restaurant being cleaned. The air smelled of coal, the popular cooking and heating fuel of the area, the hard, greasy anthracite carried in large baskets on peoples' backs by a tump-line around their foreheads.

To his right, a prep cook was preparing a chicken for the pot. The cook, a woman wrapped in black, with the draping part of her black sari framing her high cheek-boned face like a scarf, pulled on the struggling chicken's head and severed the head from its body with a couple whacks of a Kukri, the Nepali's sharp curved knife.

The headless chicken strutted around in circles, blood pumping out of where its head used to be, the deep red streaming onto the wet street and over its once-white feathers.

Then he remembered for no good reason climbing up the large hill on campus, toward the seated bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln, slipping on the shiny crystalline snow covering the hill and spot-lighted by a street lamp at the top of the hill near the statue.

Rather than take the cleared sidewalks up the hill, he and his good friends from high school--the five guys who had spent every Thanksgiving for five years together at a log cabin in Sturgeon Bay--decided it would be more fun and challenging to scale the hill on the snow that night.

It was slippery going and suddenly, one of them up ahead pretended to be shot and slid, arms reaching for the statue, in the snow a few feet. Soon, all the boys were pretending to scale the spot-lit, crystalline snow to the statue as if they were under fire, heroically trying just to get up the hill. To his right, Mark fell. Ahead and to his left, Tom. Behind him, Rick. One-by-one, each of his close high school friends, the guys he'd gotten drunk with, heard tales of broken hearts with, fought with, cried with, like brothers, fell. Beside him. In front of him. Behind him.

His wife, unmoved in her chair, the glider bought so she could breast feed her first child, her daughter, came into focus again.

"I'm sorry," he thought to himself, wishing that this loss, too, was just pretend.

Bio- Terin spent many of his formative years in India, the child of anthropologist parents. Since then, he has lived and worked in a variety of countries in Europe and Asia.

His writing has appeared in guide books, international magazines including *Time* and *Geografica Revista*, and newspapers including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Los Angeles Times*. He began his writing career as a part-time reporter for *Time* magazine, then worked for The Associated Press in India and North Dakota and AP-Dow Jones News Services in Spain and New York, and as a reporter for *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, *Amarillo Daily News* and the *Hilton Head Island Packet*.

Terin is also the author of *From Where The Rivers Come* and *Down The Low Road*.
<http://www.terinmiller.com/>

Seeking Sacajawea

By Michael Tidemann

The carumping tires had sounded for miles on Wyoming 287. At first he had wanted to come here on a whim. But the closer he came, the more serious he was about finding his ancestor.

It had started when they began sharing pedigrees, something newlyweds do when their closeness seems forced. She spoke of her family as though making a weak apology for her decision to run for attorney general.

And he, well, he was a writer and anthropologist who had entered both fields to better understand his people.

"Let's see," she said, counting off professions on her fingers like the felons she had put away as county prosecutor. "My ancestors were doctors and lawyers...and yours were Indian chiefs?" She laughed at her own joke before she finished it.

"Some were," he admitted, trying to straighten up under her withering humor. "Some were Shoshone tribal elders."

She looked at the map, imagining the days ahead. "I'm glad you talked me into this side trip to the Tetons and Yellowstone. I can't wait to get to the lodge. I understand their food is fabulous."

He eased as she switched topics. Ever since they had met he had kept his ancestry a secret – until shortly before they were married. Charbonneau was French, and for most of his life he had passed as French. And yet it was his Shoshone heritage that most fascinated him. Even as they drove the high desert toward Gannett Peak in the distance, visions of mounted warriors filled the plains in his mind.

"So what else did your relatives do besides be, uh, Indian?" Glenna asked.

Matt tried not to act insulted – or hurt. "Well, Sacajawea led the Lewis and Clark expedition across North America and back. I guess that was worth something."

"Sacajawea. That sounds funny. Like sack of jawbreakers."

"She did it with a baby in a cradle on her back, starting out when she was seventeen."

Glenna looked at him, silent for once. "Seventeen?"

"When Clark's instruments fell into the water, she dove in after them. And when they needed horses from the Shoshone, she helped out there too."

"When I was seventeen all I could think about were my hair and nails."

He was glad she was the one who had said it.

They entered the reservation and stopped at a store at Fort Washakie for directions. The Shoshone man at the counter was very helpful, pulling out a map of the cemetery and marking it with a highlighter. When Glenna laid down a T-shirt and Matt offered his credit card in payment, the clerk paused. "Say, you aren't."

"Related? Yes I am."

"So would you be related to her?" he asked, as though her name were too sacred to say.

“Yes. I’m a direct descendant.”

“You can just have the shirt,” the clerk said. “It’s a very great honor to meet you, sir.”

Glenna pointed behind them as they left the store. “What was that all about?”

“What was what all about?”

“His giving you that T-shirt. I’m sure he doesn’t do that with everybody.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t.”

He drove west toward the cemetery, the Wind River Range and Gannett Peak and the Continental Divide before them.

“Why are we taking this side road?”

“This is the road to the cemetery.”

She locked her arms in front of her. “I can hardly wait to tell everyone at the office that I spent part of my honeymoon in a cemetery.”

He knew their honeymoon was close to ending when she referred to it as her honeymoon rather than theirs. They reached the cemetery road and he turned north then pulled into the parking area just in front of the sign, Sacajawea Cemetery.

“Gee,” said Glenna. “She must have been important if they named the cemetery after her.”

“She was.”

He got out and followed the path toward his ancestor’s grave marker while Glenna went to the top of the hill. She came back a few minutes later. “It says up there that some Shoshone believe she’s buried west of here,” she said.

“Oh, she’s here all right,” he said. Her two sons were buried to each side of her. Well-wishers had placed flowers and stones on her monument, gratitude from both natives and non-natives for her heroism.

“It’s broiling and this place gives me the creeps. I’m going back to the car to turn on the air.”

He couldn’t answer, absorbed by the feelings stirring inside him. When Glenna was gone, he stretched his hands over Sacajawea’s grave to feel her power, to absorb it into himself. He tried to focus consciously, rationally, but that only seemed to push her away. So instead he opened himself, made himself hollow, as hollow as the notes from some old Shoshone flute. Then, like something that was there but not, he saw her, the teenage Shoshone girl slogging through marshes, gathering kindling for fires, tanning hides to keep the explorers’ feet warm after their shoes had rotted from their feet. And there her lazy husband Charbonneau sat, smoking his pipe and telling lies of his exploits. Her image rose from the grave and smiled down at him, Gannett Peak glistening in the distance.

“Thank you,” he cried.

“You are welcome,” she answered.

He returned to their car, knowing it had not been a dream. She was still here, looking over the Shoshone people, giving them strength.

Glenna looked up annoyed from her map. “Boy, you took a long time. I hope we don’t lose our reservations at the lodge. What were you doing there for so long.”

“Talking to her.”

“Talking to who?”

“Sacajawea.”

“You’re crazy.” She looked again at her map. “Did she talk back?”

“Yes,” he said, starting the car.

“You really are crazy.”

He knew though in his heart they had spoken. And they would speak again and again through the years. She would always be there, whenever he needed her.

Bio- Michael Tidemann is a journalist, freelance writer and adjunct English instructor living in Estherville, IA. His recent publications include a travel piece in the *Des Moines Register*, an article on writing your local history in *Writer's Journal*, a short story in *Struggle* magazine, and two short stories, "The Elk" and "The Funeral", in the last two issues of *The Write Place At the Write Time*. His novel, *Doomsday: A tale of cyber terror*, is currently out in Kindle and in print.

A Troubling Appearance

By Tim Tomlinson

One night Ewen McKenna appeared in my room.

I'd been sleeping restlessly, with an awareness that I had to pee, badly. That if I didn't wake immediately I'd piss the bed. And when I forced my eyes open, there Ewen was, leaning against the chair at my desk, looking oddly bedraggled, a slapdash facsimile of a boy, like a cross of 2 x 4s over which someone had tossed a sweatshirt and a pair of shorts.

"Come on, Cliffy," he said. "It's a full moon tonight."

And I said, "Shhhh!!!!," with my finger against my lips.

My parents slept in the next room. I could hear my father snoring. He sounded like he was in deep sleep, the kind of sleep that produced his nightmares. "No, Mama," he'd start shouting. "Please, mama, don't. Mama, no!" His shouts would wake the whole house. Sometimes I'd slip out of my bedroom and slide under Wally's bed. Sometimes I'd slide under my own. Other times he'd startle himself awake. He'd come into my room and, whether I pretended to sleep or not, he'd shake me and say, "Cliffy, come on," and we'd go out to the kitchen and sit in the refrigerator light and eat cookies and drink milk straight from the carton until it was gone.

Ewen whispered, "OK, but it's huge, man, come on. We'll go sliding down the bluff."

Ewen was my best friend since kindergarten. He came from the Village, his house sat right on the bluffs. I came from the Estates, with a backyard butt-up against the firehouse. To me, his house felt like a movie set. Three

stories high, telescopes in bay windows, you could see Connecticut across the Sound, you could count the seagulls on Sills Rock. Original paintings on the living room wall, and above the stereo components a sign his father had hung that gave warnings in pigeon German: *Keepen ze mittens offen ze Telefunken*. When Ewen visited my house, we'd go in the backyard and stare at the firemen, and the fire trucks. Sometimes we'd offer to help the men hose down the bright red trucks. They clonked helmets on our heads that settled past our eyes. Sometimes they took us to fires. They'd jump out of the trucks with their fireproof jackets unbuckled. They'd shout reports at each other while struggling to control the wild hoses. But to me, the wildest thing was watching the way Ewen's eyes widened. I liked fires OK, and I enjoyed watching firemen put them out, but Ewen's fascination bordered on rapture. Later, when Ewen and I were no longer friends, I'd set fires in the woods big enough to attract the fire trucks. I hoped Ewen might show up to marvel at the firemen extinguishing the blazes, but he never did.

"I can't go out," I told Ewen. "I'm not allowed."

"Not allowed?" he said. "Says who?"

"Who else?" I said. "My mother."

Ewen said, "She said you're not allowed out on full moons?"

"No."

"So then you're allowed."

Ewen was the kind of liar I hoped to be, the kind that used logic, and skillful argument to persuade you of the truth of what was obviously a lie.

I said, "You don't know what I mean."

He said, "You don't know what you mean. Here." He tossed me a pair of shorts. "Now come on. We'll throw rocks at the jellyfish. We'll stir up the bioluminescence."

I told him I wasn't allowed on beaches without lifeguards.

“Not allowed,” he mimicked, “Not allowed. What are you, a girl? Come on and let’s do this, man. It’s a full frikkin’ moon!”

I thought about it a moment, and then another, and another, until the moments felt like one very long moment. I could tell that the moon was particularly full, full to bursting, because of the room’s golden light. Without the full moon, the only light in the room came from a green and white Trix cereal Silly Rabbit night-light that I’d sent away for with box tops. If only that light shone, I don’t know if I’d have even been able to see Ewen. But with the moonlight, I could see his narrow almost metal-like legs. I could see the wrinkled shorts and the light sweatshirt sticking out to each side like a jacket on a clothesline. He was wearing a hat I’d never seen, a straw hat, the kind of hat you might stick on a scarecrow, and I thought how odd that was to see Ewen in a hat I’d never seen before. I wondered where that hat came from, and I thought that wherever it came from, I’d never be able to get one. Ewen got lots of things I’d never get because on vacations his family traveled to places I’d never go. They skied in the Rocky Mountains, they snorkeled in the Bahamas. And just that summer, Ewen’s family visited Europe. He did a show and tell in French class. It wasn’t “Eifel rhymes with stifle,” he’d said, it’s “Ee-fel rhymes with he fell,” and it wasn’t “Tower rhymes with flower,” it was “Tour rhymes with poor.”

I’d never been west of the Museum of Natural History, or further south than Staten Island. I wanted to ask him about that hat, I knew there’d be a cool story, but I also knew that strange as that hat was, Ewen’s patience was even stranger. When he said let’s do something, he was doing it before you even had a chance to respond. “Let’s set this shit on fire,” he might say, and before you could point out the way the wind was blowing, how the sparks might get picked up and blown into a family’s back porch, he was already cupping the flame climbing the dry reeds, blowing on it, making it red, watching it climb and grow and reach.

I pulled the covers back gently, and I made my movements carefully, quietly. The worst thing would be to wake up my parents. How would I explain what Ewen was doing there? But when I put my feet on the ground, Ewen was gone.

“Ewen, wait,” I said, rushing to the window. “I told you I’m coming.”

But I couldn’t see him out there anywhere, just the moonlight on our patchy

lawn. And my new baseball glove. That shocked me. In the morning it would be covered in dew, and the leather would get stiff and crackly. It was a great glove, an expensive glove, a Rawlings “Ted Williams” model with a basket-web and an outside leather loop for the index finger. It cost nearly \$40, and if my father saw it left out in the weather, I’d be in big trouble—now I had to go out, Ewen or no.

I reached for the shorts that Ewen had thrown me, but they were gone, too. Nothing made any sense. I looked under the covers, I looked under the bed.

That’s when the moans began.

“No,” my father groaned. “No-ohhhhh.”

I slid under the bed and the groans grew louder.

“Mama!” he shouted. “MAMA NO!”

I found a pair of shorts, maybe the pair Ewen had thrown. I wrapped them around my ears and held them there with my hands, and still the groans increased.

“Mama, you son-of-a-bitch you!”

I elbowed my way across the floor the way I’d seen men in *Combat!* crawl through bombardments. At the next series of groans, I yanked up the window screen, then slid out and dropped down to the lawn.

The moon was like a spotlight, I threw a dark shadow. I grabbed my glove and ran for the woods. The pine needles beneath my feet were soft and pointy. My father’s cries faded in the distance.

Through the yards, over the fences, into the woods. Then, alongside the gully, I climbed my favorite tree, a narrow oak with branches you had to shimmy to reach. From its top branches I could see north all the way to Long Island Sound, south to Jericho Turnpike. And just below, in the golden moonlight, the houses of my block looked like cut-outs popping up from cardboard. The firehouse was all lit up, as if the firemen were itching to get to a blaze.

I couldn't see Ewen, not on the fire roads, or on the paths that led through the woods. I couldn't hear him running over twigs or pine needles. Maybe he'd already reached the bluff. Maybe he'd gone over. I pictured him on the cool beach, walking barefoot across rocks without flinching, and wading into the cool shiny water where the jellyfish pulsed in the tiny surf. I pictured him in that kooky straw hat, looking like Huckleberry Finn or Tom Sawyer. If my father saw me in a hat like that, he'd say, "Get that silly looking thing off your head." But he seemed to get a kick out of anything Ewen did. He got mad if I burped, but he laughed out loud when Ewen burped entire sentences.

Two trees away I could see the shape of an owl, motionless, his eyes round and wide open, unblinking. I tried staring back. I hoped I'd see the owl lift into the air column, then swoop down onto the back of something small and unsuspecting. Small and unsuspecting things were around, you could hear them skittering along the paths, rustling in the undergrowth. Were they mice, squirrels, fawns, foxes? My father said there were bears in these woods, bears as old as the Civil War, but I'd never seen one, and the teachers said there was no such thing as bears on Long Island. Stuff my father said was often different from what my teachers said. Climbing trees, for instance. My father said boys died at the tops of trees because they got stuck to the sap. Our teachers said that trees climbed too much died. I learned not to trust either of their assertions, and operate instead on what I could figure out for myself.

Abruptly, the owl turned its stare from me toward the houses of my block, its head poking for an angle. And then, faintly, in the distance, I heard my father's moans.

I could make out the words. "Mama!" I heard him shouting. "Mama, no!"

He kept coming into the woods, groaning, moaning, and his cries got louder and more urgent.

"Don't, mama, no!" he shouted, as if warding off blows.

And then, in the tree-line at the gully's edge, I could see him.

He wore his sleeveless t-shirt and nothing else. The enormous trunk of him

lumbered through the scrub oak. Carefully, I slid to the dark side of my tree. He kept coming closer and closer, and he continued crying out. What was even more amazing was to see my mother, walking carefully, remaining silent, right behind him. She seemed to be naked beneath the white terrycloth robe she held closed in one fist. She saw me up in the tree and put a finger to her lips. They passed just below my tree, and the owl's, and continued by. The owl swiveled its head and watched them recede, two white figures following shadows on the fire road, proceeding like characters from the grave in a science fiction movie. When they reached Miller Avenue I scrambled back down the tree. I ran as fast as I could back home. I hopped the fence into the backyard, pulled the milk box over near my window, and muscled up and over the sill.

Back under the covers, I fell asleep clutching my glove.

In the morning, the glove wasn't there.

At breakfast, my mother stepped back from the refrigerator.

"Your father's been at it again," she said, shaking an empty milk carton. She lifted the lid on the trashcan. "I don't know why he just doesn't throw his crap away."

I said, "Did you hear him last night?"

She said, "Hear who?"

"Did you hear anything?"

She said, "What are you talking about? Come on, hurry up and get dressed."

She dropped a pair of Pop Tarts in the toaster and opened a can of Hoffman's Cola.

"Was there a full moon last night," I asked.

She said, "Do you seriously think I have time to look at the moon?"

At school, Ewen said he didn't remember coming over. But on a full moon,

he said, anything's possible.

Bio- Tim Tomlinson is a co-founder of the New York Writers Workshop, and co-author of its popular text, *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*. He is the fiction editor of the webzine *Ducts*. Recent fiction and poetry appear or are forthcoming in *Asia Writes*, *Caribbean Vistas*, *The Dirty Napkin*, *Extracts*, *Floorboard Review*, *The New Poet*, *Saxifrage Press*, *The Tule Review*, *Unshod Quills*, and in the anthology *Long Island Noir* (Akashic Books). Currently he teaches in Shanghai with the NYU Shanghai program.

Two Times One

By Joan Walsh

My identical twin brother and I emerged as a single egg that split in half, making us roommates and best friends nine months before we were born. My brother, the first born by five minutes, paved the way for my breech arrival, which explains why my head was so perfectly shaped in our four-day-old photo shoot. For eighteen years we shared one bedroom, attended the same public schools, and wandered restlessly through puberty, side by side with like-minded friends. Our lives were intricately woven together like fine silk, until senior year, when the threads connecting us were torn as my brother flattened me with words I'll never forget.

"Bro, I'm tired of being known as one of the twins. Let's apply to different colleges, and see how life goes when we're not running side by side like subway tracks."

"You must be kidding," I responded, slapping my forehead. My throat tightened and eye contact became impossible. I kicked the ottoman and slumped into Mom's overstuffed chair, trying to wrap my mind around the idea of losing my side-kick to his rush with curiosity. My insides stirred, causing me to sweat profusely.

"It's time. I'm not..."

"Ya. Who says? Some stupid adult rule from someone who knows nothing about being an identical twin?"

"No! Grow up pal."

I shook my head, closed my eyes, and shut my mouth until my brother left the house to do errands. My chin started to tremble, so I rushed to the upstairs bathroom, locked the door, and turned on all the faucets. My sobs vibrated the glass in the shower door.

“Can I help?” Mom asked.

“No!”

My body was too broken to be pieced together at a moment’s notice, so I melted like an icicle; one drop at a time.

Eventually, I walked downstairs, wearing a sliver of a smile and pulling at my shirt collar. I was hoping Mom had buried what she heard in the basement of her mind, beneath all of the typical household concerns that came of raising two teenagers as a single parent; but her motherly intuition had been tripped off like an alarm system. She wouldn't press and yet she wouldn't ignore it either.

“Want to talk?”

“Not really. But thanks, Mom.”

As much as I wanted to convince my brother to change his mind, I forced my lips shut and left the house. Meltdowns suck. I ran down the porch steps, shoved my hands in my jacket pocket, and kicked the leaves as I stumbled through the park. Along the way, I hid my private thoughts inside of the surreal rabbit hole I felt I was falling down, having been shoved off of steady ground.

Time rushed by senior year. I absorbed myself with school work, casual dating, and swim meets, leaving little time for my woe-is-me. I pushed myself to swim faster than ever. It paid off. Our team won the regional championship. Clutching the team trophy with my co-captain twin brother and hiding behind cheers of a first place victory served me well.

“Bro, you beat my personal best time on every stroke. No fair.”

“Stick around and I’ll teach you a thing or two,” I said.

“Mom left me a phone message. Our college acceptance letters arrived in today’s mail.”

“Oh joy.” Now it had become inescapably real.

We confirmed our placement at separate universities, with only one short summer left.

“Let’s enjoy our camp job and forget about college for now. Remember girls, girls, and more girls.”

“Have to admit, we have it made, being the only Irish guys working in a Kosher, Jewish camp kitchen. Parents would flip if they knew their lovely daughters mingled with nice Jewish boys, but preferred to dance the nights away with the forbidden Irish. Pretty faces 'til lights out. Some kinda luck, I say.”

“Life is sweet.”

Come late August the camp doors closed and we headed home to repack our belongings for college. I wanted to press the pause button right there, right then at that moment.

“I’ll see you on break. Everything will work out. You’ll see. Be in touch.”

“Take care,” I whispered, as my smile faded watching my brother jog to the car and drive off.

Two days later, I dragged my bags to my college campus. *I hate today.* Thoughts of sharing a room with strangers cramped my enthusiasm for dormitory living. Luckily, my social skills surpassed my leadership skills so I survived, even though I longed for one thing- hanging out with my brother, my best friend.

During college breaks, we joined forces, out and about with hometown buddies. Late nights were spent bragging about girls we were dating and comparing classes. I wanted to tell my brother how much I missed the good

old days, but instead I blabbed, best-buddy style, exaggerating the highlights of my intricately tangled college life. My lips couldn't spill the truth.

"Running short on spending money. Have girls, need money," I said.

"Hear ya, Bro. Don't think I'll make swim team on the college level for long, so I'll try for a lifeguard job soon. Five in the morning practice, five days a week, kills. Add classes and Meg to the schedule, and there's no time to study."

Four years passed. Not once did my brother invite me to spend a long weekend at his dorm, so I learned to swallow with ease again, letting the blood swirl more freely through my veins in my solitude. After graduation, he decided to travel across country in search of adventure and work. No invitation offered to join him.

I secured a job in my college town and shared a cottage by the river with two friends. The cottage had an arch-shaped, wooden door that held the promise of magic upon entering.

My brother flew in and out of my life like a ping pong ball, yet we enjoyed every minute of time we spent together, laughing about things others might not understand. He never spoke words of regret, as he seemed blinded and consumed by the magnetic draw of traveling and his lust for independence.

After a weekend visit to Mom's while she was walking with me to my car to see me off, she handed me a film labeled "Two Times One" and said, "Here, you might want to borrow this."

"Thanks. I haven't seen this in years. Can't wait."

So the next evening after work, I walked up the winding stone path to the cottage, ordered pizza, grabbed a beer, and sat in my favorite chair by the fireplace. The hand-painted wooden panels of fairytale figures resting on the mantel invited me to dim the lights and take a slow-motion walk through childhood; twin infants, four days old, scratched identical thumbnail marks on the tips of their noses at exactly the same time; two babies tiny enough to share one crib, rolled their bodies from front to back

and back to front simultaneously; babbling toddlers making sounds only they understood, while their arms and legs moved like prize fighters exercising for the ring; summertime, and two first grade firemen wearing helmets, boots and badges, begging Grammy to pour cold water over their heads while they pretended to save the world; a freaked-out Mom trying to enter our shared bedroom, speechless at the sight of action figures gliding on string and yarn from door knobs to bureau drawer handles to bedposts. Our laced bedroom looked like a spider's web, with little plastic men darting towards Lego space stations, castles, and skyscrapers at the far end of our bedroom; my brother performed the lead role in our middle school play, while I sang with the chorus, moving my lips, but making very little sound; prom nights with girlfriends of the moment; two seniors waved diplomas on graduation day like the Statue of Liberty holds her torch.

I watched the film many times, and I couldn't wait to see it again with my brother when he came home. Laughs, laughs and more laughs. Months progressed and nothing more than emails with attached pictures of west coast sights arrived.

Mom's birthday came around and I invited her to my cottage for a special birthday dinner. I snapped her picture before we sat down to chat. Sixty and smiling. We turned our heads in unison at an unexpected knock. My brother flew through the door, bags in hand.

Once he got settled, he turned to me and said, "I've decided to move closer to your place." He paused for a moment, measuring the effect of the declaration by my expression. "I've made friends, and the job's OK, but something's missing. Maybe we could start a business, the two of us? What do ya think?"

There was something, not in the words themselves, but in what had been powerful enough to inspire them, that I'd been waiting for since we were seventeen and he'd announced his decision to part ways. It didn't matter if the idea came to pass; there was simply meaning in the fact that he'd spoken the words at all.

"I think you're just in time to see a film."

Before I dimmed the lights, I smiled, reached for my camera, and tossed it gently to Mom. “Quick! Snap a picture of us. This could be a fleeting moment.”

Bio- Joan Walsh is the author of CAPE COD MEMORY MAKERS Explore the Town of Falmouth; book one in a series of interactive picture book journals. Her career as a teacher includes teaching second grade, special needs K-8, gifted and talented, and supervising student teachers at Simmons College. She is the leader of the West Falmouth, MA SCBWI Critique Group, and the founder of Cape Cod Children’s Writers.

<http://www.capecodchildrenswriters.com>

Leaves

By Anita Solick Oswald

The night breeze had piled the dried leaves, thin now like onion skins, up against the glass door in her bedroom. She and her sleek black cat stretched simultaneously, arching their backs and shaking the sleep from somnolent muscles and bones. Rubbing her hands, stiff from arthritis, she smoothed the velvety quilt that covered her, reluctant to rise just yet, savoring the quiet moment. Her joints throbbed – her thumbs were almost useless now. Her thin sensitive skin was a contrast to her resilient persona. She hid her fragility well; consequently, she was often misunderstood.

It had only been a few days before that those same leaves blanketed the ground like a crazy patchwork quilt, resplendent in their fall color. She sighed involuntarily, reflecting how the frost had stripped the last vestiges of life from the leaves, which had seemed so alive and colorful, even after they fell. *Just like me.*

Wistful, she felt melancholy for a moment. Her favorite time of year, her birth month was ebbing away, although no one apparently had notified the flock of sparrows that alternately perched and dived at the bird feeder outside her bedroom. The big cottonwood, which they affectionately named Queen because of her abundance and propensity to drop bags full of leaves and seed pods, was now bare. Queen was lush in the spring. Her blossoms gave off a heady perfume that intoxicated the bees. Drunk on the scent, they wobbled from one cluster of blossoms to another, gathering

pollen. Queen had sheltered her bedroom from the intense summer heat, her branches and leaves spreading over the patio and roof like a great Egyptian fan. The tree gave so much; she wished she could build a room around it and bring it into her house.

Even after the hot summer, Queen kept giving – the tree became a kaleidoscope of bright colors, still teeming, still vibrant. She began to shed her robes the week before Halloween but the leaves still throbbed with life until the frost sucked the last moisture out of them, leaving them desiccated.

The warm weather had returned briefly and the twin squirrels, born in the spring, now adolescent, romped on Queen's bones.

I should celebrate today. I made it. She'd made a bet with herself to outlive her father, who'd suddenly passed away shortly after his sixty-fourth birthday. *I beat the odds.* Both her mother and father died suddenly from congenital disorders that she had inherited. *String of Pearls. What a luxurious name for a deadly disorder. TIAs, sounds innocent enough, too – I hate acronyms. Doesn't describe the pain, the searing headaches, the quadruple vision, the amnesia. Transient ischemic attacks. They're mini strokes, really. Poor Gram had them, too. Thought she was a girl again and her mother had just been struck by a car and killed. If only they'd all known.* Then a thought comforted her. *Well, Mom and Dad said they never wanted to be old. Their final gift to us.*

A familiar zoop demanded her attention. She smiled. Text message from Deirdre: "Good morning, Mumsie, how r u? Hope u r having a wonderful morning. Lunch today? About 1? Love you."

She replied, "Yes! Love u2."

These messages were a part of their ritual, mother and daughter – a daily affirmation of their mutual love. *How did I ever get such a perfect daughter?* The thought always pleased her. She assumed that most parents were proud of their children, but Deirdre really was an exceptional person. And the anticipation of her daughter's visit energized her. Now she hurried to shower and dress for her daughter's visit, even though it would be hours before Deirdre arrived.

She grabbed the steaming mug of black coffee that her husband lovingly presented to her each day and perched it on the bathroom counter. The aroma was enticing, bittersweet – coffee always smelled better when it was brewing. *Give us this day our daily strength.* With one sip, the synapses began to fire; she started her mental list of plans for the day. Pinning up her long, still silky hair, she slipped off her kimono, and surveyed her body.

Rock of Sisyphus, this exercising. I used to be so skinny. I'll have to starve myself. Ugh. I don't want to. So tired of denying myself. I've done enough. Oh well, the face doesn't look so bad. Got the good genes there.

The hot water scalded the pain from her bones; she could stay under the shower until the water started to get cold, but she had things to do. She wanted to get some work done before Deirdre came so she could give her undivided attention to her daughter. She dried herself, combed her long hair into a ponytail, and dressed quickly, donning a comfortable shirt and pants. Not the yoga pants. Deirdre would gently chide her if she wore something too casual when they went to lunch and she did not like to disappoint her daughter, ever. Deirdre had been such a bright light from the moment she was born, the darling, happy girl that everyone loved. The beautiful child with the sweet face and sweeter disposition. A kind soul.

She happily sped through hundreds of emails, researched a few items, and reviewed several contracts, making short work of the tedium, the mind numbing activities that paid her wages. Deirdre was coming for lunch! Then she saw her daughter walking up the drive. Her long, wavy black hair moved slightly with the breeze. She seemed to float along, always graceful. Up the front steps and then she heard the front door creak open. “Hello Mumsie,” Deirdre joined her in her office while she polished off the last email.

“You know I always feel young, Mom, but, oh Mom, I just saw Mike in the driveway, and he’s...”

She filled in her daughter’s thoughts, “Middle-aged.”

Her daughter countered, “I’m middle-aged.”

Mike was her former neighbor’s son. A few years older than Deirdre, the

boy who struggled with dyslexia, had grown into a businessman and property owner, thanks to loving parents.

“Deirdre, I know what you mean. Except for the achy joints, I still feel like that wild kid I write about. Remember, Grandma Helen always said she felt like she was seventeen, and was shocked when she looked in the mirror. Speaking of which, you need to touch up the roi tatch.”

The roi tatch was their own colloquialism for gray hair. The expression had its origins in their trip to the Aran Islands, when a local tour guide accustomed to speaking Gaelic, referred to the cottages’ roofs as “roi tatch.” They puzzled about the expression and realized he meant rye thatch. Sometime after, Deirdre coined the phrase, roi tatch – their affectionate secret code to advise that it was time for a visit to the hairdresser.

And now she studied her daughter objectively. Again, she admired the young woman. Who would have ever thought she’d become a nurse? *She seems so elegant. Such difficult, heartbreaking cases, and she takes it all in stride. Always optimistic.* Then she remembered the tiny girl who never cried and stoically made conversation with the doctors in the emergency room. The independent child who asked questions and put the hospital staff at ease while they stitched up a cut below her eye. Calm in a storm. She thought it made sense. And now her daughter mentored student nurses, guiding them to gain confidence in the healing arts.

Deirdre remarked on the fallen leaves. “Just a few days ago they were so effervescent, against the green grass.”

“Yes, the freeze and the wind stripped all the trees of their leaves. Ralph’s raked up some of them and I thought I’d pile some around the trees and the plants to protect them. Want to help me? We’ll have snow soon.”

I know that, when my winter comes, she’ll be there for me.

Bio- Anita Solick Oswald is a Chicago native. She’s written a collection of essays, *West Side Girl* (working title), that are written from the point of view of her younger self and chronicle the colorful, diverse and oftentimes unpredictably eccentric characters and events that populated Chicago’s West Side neighborhood during the 50s & 60s.

Her essays have appeared in *The Write Place at the Write Time*, *The Faircloth Literary Review*, *Fullosia Press*, *The Fat City Review*, and *Avalon Literary Review*.

She studied journalism at Marquette University, earned her B.A. in Economics from the University of California at Los Angeles and her M.S. in Management and Organization from the University of Colorado.

She is a founding member of Boulder Writing Studio, where she has been generating and editing essays over the past 2 years.

Note: The lyrics briefly referenced in the following story are from the song entitled, "Pearl" by Katy Perry (<http://www.katyperry.com/>).

Pyramid

By Sierra Dawn

*"She is a pyramid,
But with him she's just a grain of sand..."*

She felt as though a miniature knife was jabbing in and out of her skin, slicing through it at an excruciatingly slow rate, and she struggled not to flinch. She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, clenching her left hand into a fist. When she peeked open her eyes, the whites of her knuckles were tinged with a sallow yellow. She stared at those discolored knuckles, feeling her fingernails dig into the palm of her hand. She focused on that slight pain, which she had complete control over, rather than on the pain in her right wrist, where the needle pierced her skin and left dark ink behind.

She made the mistake of glancing at her right wrist, and saw small beads of blood popping up to the surface of her skin. They followed the needle across her wrist, like a trail of devoted disciples. It was as though they were glad to be released from her flesh, and they showed their gladness by following their savior.

The pain would release her as well. But, somehow, this freeing pain was so much more difficult to endure than the pain which she had been trapped within for so long.

His fist connected with her face and she heard her nose break. This was not the first time, and she knew better than to fight back by now. The back of her head exploded with pain as she collided with a corner in the wall behind her. Her vision went black, causing her to stumble over the step between

the kitchen and living room. She learned later that then must have been when she broke a small bone in her ankle. At that moment though, all she was aware of was the sudden feel of carpet on her cheek. And then his boot. He was yelling, but all she could hear was the rhythm made by the kicking, the rhythm that continued in her head even after he had finished with her.

Once he left, and she was certain that doing so would not infuriate him more, she stood up. She remembered a time when she would feel humiliation and shame after he was through with her; now she felt nothing. But she knew that she should do something productive if she did not want him angry again. So she brushed her hand across her mouth, wiped the blood off onto her jeans, got the trash out from under the sink and made her way to the front door.

The closer she got to the trash at the corner of the driveway, the darker her vision became around the edges. The cold night air made a cut in her lip sting. And the pain in her ribs and ankle started drawing more and more attention to themselves with each step she took.

She had just managed to make it to the sidewalk when she collapsed. She heard a car brake, and its door open, then someone yelling again – it seemed like someone was always yelling. Just before she lost consciousness, she thought she heard music.

*"...could be a Statue of Liberty,
She could be a Joan of Arc,
But he's scared of the light that's inside of her,
So he keeps her in the dark..."*

And then that's what everything was: dark.

When she woke up, she was in the hospital. Her friend was there – the friend she had forgotten to remove from her in-case-of-emergency list, who used to always tell her to leave the man she loved, who she hadn't spoken to in over a year and a half.

After a nurse had come to check her over, she finally broke the silence.

"Why are you here?" her voice was raspy.

"Why isn't he?"

She had no ready answer. If he was not here now, he might come later.

“How long have I been here?”

“Two days. You’ve been conscious, but pretty out of it. Pain meds. You know.”

She recognized pain leaking out of each word.

“He loves me.”

“Not enough to be here.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. He was afraid, that was all, afraid he would get into trouble. But she would go home and he would be so happy and relieved to see that she was all right.

“Don’t you remember who you used to be?” Pain again.

“I’m the same person I used to be.”

“You’re only a shadow of her.”

A memory flashed through her mind of playing monopoly with her friend when they were kids, arguing over the little car piece. They used to mini-golf every Saturday, always green and blue clubs. When they were in sixth grade she won a trip to Egypt with her family. Seeing the pyramids was when she first knew she wanted to be an anthropologist. (Though she had only made it through her first year of college to do so.) She used to love karaoke nights. She used to laugh.

She noticed two vases of flowers on the little nightstand next to her bed and she was overcome with relief. He had sent her flowers. He did love her.

“Who are those from?” she asked triumphantly.

Hesitation, then, “One’s from me. The other is from the people who called the ambulance for you.”

So that was the truth. Strangers cared more about her than her own boyfriend. He would not have risked anything sending flowers. No one would have accused him of anything. He would not have even had to show up with them. And yet it was still too much.

She cried, with her friend's arms gently wrapped around her, careful not to hurt her bruised and tender skin.

He had been so sweet when they had first met. She was at the beach with her friends, enjoying the afternoon before the bonfire hosted by their university's Greek students. She had caught him staring at her across the beach. Her friends had thought it was creepy, but she had been flattered that he had picked her out of the dozens of bikini-clad women there.

They had talked until the bonfire started. She completely forgot about the friends she had come with. They were so wrapped up in conversation, they did not notice one particular drunken student walking by until a stumble resulted in both of them being drenched in beer.

"So sorry! Dinnn't mean to! Are you okay?" the student seemed to be having as much trouble speaking as walking.

"Oh, you didn't mean to? Well, that's okay then. Now we're not covered in beer!" his voice continued rising, until he glanced at her watching him. He visibly tried to calm himself down. The other student took the chance to get away.

"C'mon, it's not a big deal," she tried to laugh the situation off. He must have felt so embarrassed about his outburst. "Why don't we dry off, and then maybe dance a little?"

And so that was what they did. They were still a little sticky the rest of the night, but at least they were not wet anymore. The most she remembered from that night was the way the music filled her while she danced. She could not help but sing along, very loudly after a couple drinks. He had always told her that her abandon with the music was what really drew him to her. But she had not done it for him.

She had been in the hospital over a week, and still no word from him. She had never felt so distant from him. They had never gone so long without speaking. The first couple days had been painful. She had felt lost and alone without him. But now a small sense of freedom was beginning to creep in.

Her friend came every day. Sometimes they would talk, catch up on the parts of each other's lives they'd missed. Sometimes they would watch TV

together, when the patient she shared a room with was not already using the TV. Sometimes they would just sit in silence, both absorbed in their own thoughts. Today they were playing cards.

“Got any kings?”

“Go fish.”

“So you’ve been seeing the shrink the hospital set you up with?” Her friend reached for a card in the fish pile.

She shrugged. She had been seeing the therapist. But she did enough talking there; she did not want to keep talking afterward.

“Does it help?”

She studied her cards intently before answering. “Sometimes. Any tens?”

“Fish.”

She grabbed a card from the pile, a queen. She had expected the therapist to tell her to leave him, like her friends always used to. But mostly she just talked, while the shrink listened, and asked questions every once in a while. She had not thought so much about him before. She used to just instinctively say “no” when her friends told her to leave, that she deserved better than him. But how could she answer when someone asked why she had not left, why she did not think she deserved better?

“What do you talk about when you’re there?”

She shrugged again. “You know. My childhood, my friends, my family, what I like to do for fun.” She remembered that she had not had much to say about that question. “Why I stopped going to school. And what it’s like at home.”

Her friend nodded. “Do you have any twos?”

“Go fish.” As her friend reached for another card, she confessed, “Speaking of school, I was thinking I’d go back. Once I get out of here. Finish studying anthropology, finally go see those pyramids again.”

"That'd be great." Surprise filled her friend's voice. "I mean, you should do what makes you happy."

The patient on the other side of the room got out of bed and started rummaging through a backpack some family member had brought. Out came a set of headphones and a small MP3 player. They could hear the faint music coming out.

They played, only speaking when asking for a card, until she recognized what was coming out of the headphones. She could not hear the words, but the tune seemed familiar. At first she could not place why, until it hit her – it was the song she'd heard coming out of the car that had stopped for her when she had collapsed in front of her house. She had thought that she'd imagined it, that it was just a creation of her concussed brain as she'd passed out. But here it was again, real.

"What is that?"

The other patient took one ear bud out. "What?"

"I said, 'What's that you're listening to?'"

"Oh, here."

And then the patient was up again, next to her bed, offering her an ear bud. She took it, and placed it next to her own ear.

*"...used to be a pearl,
Yeah, she used to rule the world..."*

The familiar music bombarded her, forcing her to listen to the words as she could not have when she passed out a week ago.

The tempo sped up and the intensity of the music and the words roared in her ear. She began humming along. She had always been slightly tone deaf, and she was nowhere near on key now, but she felt connected to the music, as if she could tell where it was taking her.

"Do you know that there's a way out..."

Her friend looked worried, but when she began singing the words under her breath the worry turned to cautious optimism. She had not sung in so long.

The tempo slowed down again, and she caught up with it.

"You don't have to be held down..."

Now the music was slower than it had ever been before. It almost stopped. For just a second, she wondered if that was the end.

But just when she thought it was all over, the voice came through the ear bud once again,

"Cause I used to be a shell..."

The next words did not quite make it to her. All she could think was, *Is that what I am?* The music became background noise as the tempo picked up again to its original pace. When the song ended, something made her start it over again from the beginning.

*"She is a pyramid,
But with him she's just a grain of sand..."*

She went back to letting the music wash over her without recognizing the words. She handed the ear bud back to her temporary roommate.

"I could put it on a CD for you, if you want."

All she could do was nod.

As the other patient went back to the far side of the room, ear buds back in place, she looked again at the cards in her hand.

"Do you have any queens?" Her friend handed one over, and she set her first pair of the game down in front of her.

Finally, she had something.

She had been out of the hospital a month and she had only spoken to him once. Her friend had helped her move out, to keep her strong, keep her from giving in. Now she had found her own place and was getting ready to move again, this time out of her friend's home. She took her time packing the last box.

She felt like her old self had died the night she'd passed out in her front yard, and now she was starting a new – entirely foreign – life. It reminded her of the ancient Egyptians, building their pyramid tombs for royalty to use between this life and the next. Death wasn't the end; it was the beginning of the next life.

“That’s the last of it, isn’t it?”

She jumped as her friend came into the room, and nodded in response.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Her friend reached for a pile of shirts.

“Don’t worry, I got it.” She continued slowly stacking folded shirt after folded shirt into the box at her feet. The sooner she was done, the sooner she would leave. And the sooner she’d truly be on her own.

“I’ll miss you.”

She looked up, surprised to see her friend’s eyes welling up.

“I’ll miss you too.”

“We’ll still see each other though. And we’ll both be on campus next semester, right?”

“Right.” She smiled; the expression had become familiar again, astonishingly quickly over the last month. She hesitated before rushing on so she couldn’t stop herself, “What if I can’t do it without you? What if I’m not strong enough?”

“You are.”

She waited for more, but that was it.

“Maybe I just need something to remind me, for when you’re not around.”

Her friend nodded.

She set the last of her clothes in the box and stared at the living room. It looked like it had when she’d moved in, except for the now-empty coat closet. By tomorrow, the coats in her friend’s bedroom closet would make their way back out here, and it would be like she was never there. But, even

though it looked the same, it felt different. It was something she could not put her finger on, but she was leaving it changed, somehow.

She picked up the box and took it out to her car. She said good-bye to her friend, and then she was off.

“Done.” The tattoo artist looked up from the finished work on her right wrist. Now, with the needle out of the way, she could see it clearly. There were a couple drops of blood still lingering, but the tattoo artist dabbed them away, wrapped her wrist in cellophane, and began giving her instructions for caring for it.

When she left the tattoo parlor, her wrist still stung. It was red, and raw. But now she had a small pyramid imprinted there. Each brick was defined in ink, fitting together to make a powerful structure that could stand strong for centuries, despite what storms tried to knock it down. In the center was an unseen light source, shining out from within.

She smiled, despite the pain. Now she will never forget:

She is a pyramid.

Bio- Sierra Dawn has been writing fiction since her senior year of high school, when a short story of hers won third place in a campus writing contest. Since then, she has completed a large sampling of short stories in a wide variety of styles. One of these was published in a literary arts journal in the spring of 2010, and another was printed at the Black Rock Press on the University of Nevada, Reno campus. She also had an academic paper published in another literary arts journal in the fall of 2011.

Away

By Monica Hileman

The last day of vacation and she's making her way along the shops on Commercial Street while her husband is playing golf with a friend they ran into at the restaurant last night. "Are you sure you don't mind, darling?" he said, when they got back to the inn. They call each other "darling" when they are feeling hyper-married and need to step back and show the gap

between what is ordinarily thought of as “a married couple” and the two of them.

“Not at all, darling,” she answered. “I need to pick up a few gifts.”

The door jangles as she steps out onto the sidewalk leaving the fragrances of scented oils and handmade soaps. On the rooftop of the guesthouse across the street there are tables under a green tarp strung with lights, the bulbs like natural pearls in daylight. Nothing since that muffin, she’s hungry now and sees the sign, “Best lobster club.” Eating lobster is one thing they didn’t get around to.

In the lull between lunch and cocktail hour, he’s standing at the end of the bar watching the scene below. A woman comes out of the hippie bath shop across the street and for a second he thinks he knows her. There’s the guy from last night walking with his tall, muscle-bound boyfriend. Oh well, they must have made up. Those two coming out of the leather shop were at dinner last night. Lousy tippers. What is that waitress doing filling all the water pitchers? – the ice is just going to melt. Here comes someone up the stairs. Forehead, eyes, nose – the woman he just saw across the street. Sure, take any table.

She sits on the inside, overlooking the tiled courtyard below: bushy hibiscus reaching up from giant terra cotta pots, water gurgling down an artful mound of rocks, red flowers blooming on the white trellis at the back wall. A gust of wind flutters the green canvas overhead, flapping the awning’s scalloped edges. She looks out toward the street, beyond the peaked rooftops of the white and oyster-gray houses, out past the docks, surprised to see the distant sky now clotted with heavy clouds.

Evelyn – that’s who she reminds him of. She had white-blonde hair on her arms that weren’t thin as pencils like the girl in biology lab who went with him behind the gym one night, but then lost her nerve. Evelyn was older – a married woman – she knew what she wanted. Her hips curved out from her waist and her breasts made his mouth fall open when she took off her bra. He’d never seen a real woman naked before, never touched or tasted or climbed on and gave it his all – too much, she said, ease up, slow down. He proved himself, proved he wasn’t what they said. Well, he was of course, but he could also be what they called “a man”. After that, he let his inclination take him where it would: into cars parked on secluded streets at

night and bathroom stalls. She's probably wondering why he's staring at her. He takes the rag and wipes down the bar, moving to the end overlooking the sidewalk. The new kid at Chet's is strolling by in a Speedo, so he lets out a wolf whistle. Somebody else looks up and he laughs, yelling down, "Not you, your boyfriend."

My husband – will she ever get used to saying that? They've been calling this a vacation – with their schedules, it took months to find the time -- but really it's their honeymoon. That sounds corny for a couple who moved in together six years ago. The wedding was one of those things they went ahead and did; there wasn't a lot of planning, just a bunch of friends in the backyard followed by a potluck buffet and dancing in a nearby church basement. After days of shared sloth and indulgence, this is the first time the two of them have been apart. She savors sitting there in the bright air with the warm breeze on her skin, his absence giving her the space to reflect. If she weren't so sated, so splendidly drained from that morning spent in bed, she'd be like that giggling three year old they saw on the beach yesterday running along the water's edge.

He uncorks the Riesling and pours her a glass. The waitress takes it over, weaving her way past a boisterous foursome spilling out from the stairs. They take a table near the bar and he feels his headache coming back. He can't party like he used to and roll out of bed after four hours sleep, grab a shower, and be ready to go. This morning, putting one foot on the floor and then the other, he had a watery feeling in his stomach and his legs were sore. That guy in the kitchen sure is fast; here comes the waitress bringing her order. As the plate is set down in front of her she sits up in her chair. He watches as she takes out the toothpick holding together that half, gets a grip with both hands, opens her mouth and closes her eyes.

The lightly-toasted bread gives a soft crunch as she bites in. The bacon is done right, nether brittle nor chewy. And the tomato is tender, deep-red, vine ripe. Her teeth sink into the firm texture of lobster meat and she smiles as she chews. On the side is a little crock of lemony whipped butter, a juicy half pickle, and a sprig of fresh rosemary. Just a sandwich, but it's perfect. She opens her eyes and the bartender grins, nodding back at her.

Two older guys take a table toward the back. He sees how they sit, both of them leaning forward, used to whispering. Here they don't need to worry, but maybe it's how they've been all their lives, looking over their shoulders, afraid of being caught. Sometimes he misses that aura of danger, that

uneasy intimacy. A roaring motorcycle draws his attention back toward the street and he notices how dark it's getting out at sea. Gin and Tonics for the two at the back. Bloody Marys for the table of four. She's finished the sandwich already and signals the waitress. The next time he looks over, she's gone.

She runs up the street because she feels like running and comes in breathless to find him stepping out of the shower, his body tanned and glistening.

"You'll get all wet," he tells her, so she drapes a towel between them while they kiss. He pulls back for air with strands of her hair stuck to his chin. "Hey, easy there, we've got a boat to catch."

Another guest drops them at the dock where they stand in line waiting to board while those arriving stream past, happy to set their feet on solid land.

A woman glances back at the slate colored sky and warns, "It's pretty choppy out there." The wind whips the branches over the ice cream stand, loudly rustling the leaves. Fewer of them climb up the ramp than the thirty or so who just got off. She hasn't looked at a TV or a paper all week.

"The forecast can't be that bad," he says. Or they wouldn't be going.

The boat pulls out, the engine churning, the white spray leaping up against the sides. The seagulls circle and shriek as they move out under the darkening sky – even darker ahead. When she faces back to land, the town has disappeared.

The sea is rocking, threatening to lift them onto their feet, then tossing them back against the bench. They crouch trying to walk, grasping at whatever their hands can reach, helpless against the laughter threatening to dissolve what little control they have. He holds onto the rail and she holds onto him. The world is three quarters sky, then all sky, then three quarters water, the boat rising and dipping like it's about to capsize. The edge of the earth flashes in a bursts of light. A low rumbling soaks the air and the black sky opens up, the downpour driving those still on the open deck staggering for cover.

They'll make it home, of course they will. But right now it seems anything could happen, and it's wonderful.

Bio- Monica Hileman's stories have appeared in *American Writing*, *Georgetown Review*, and the anthology *Final Fenway Fiction*. Another is forthcoming in *The Baffler*, due out in March.

For more information go to monicahileman.com.

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