

Snapshots

Patty Somlo

Early in the morning, fog hugs the redwoods that climb the high bank on the opposite shore. It's chilly on the deck, but I don't mind. Ever so slowly the sun rises and warms, while bits of gray-white mist release and drift, and dark green, nearly black branches, emerge.

Another cloud of fog loosens and begins to break apart. I write, *I have been running away from this ache my whole life.*

By the time I look up, the fog has burned off. The sun is peeking up from behind the bank. One ray is painting golden ripples across the river.

My husband and I used to visit here in the years when we rented a small, sunny apartment about an hour and a half drive south. We came for weekends and sometimes longer.

I got to know the ache of grief and sorrow, in a pleasant room sitting across from my therapist, Lori, for the hour that was never permitted to linger a breath beyond fifty minutes. If I breathe in, grounding myself by planting my feet firmly on the floor, the ache will inevitably loosen and I will begin to cry.

Week after week, fifty minute-slot after fifty-minute-slot, I sat in that room and sobbed. Some days I sobbed so hard I feared my soul would drown. That never happened. But neither did the ache leave me. There are cold clinical terms for what I have. But I am more interested in poetry.

In my earliest memory, I am standing at the window and we are having a storm. I recall the fierce wind and rain being a hurricane. Whether this is true or not, I know I was a short, blond child of five, and I watched my best friend Hillary Sheehan's blue plastic swimming pool sail by.

The pool lifted and tossed in that swirling storm. The ache comes because I can't remember a single thing about that house.

In the next place we lived, thousands of miles away from Maryland on the island of Oahu, we had a Koa tree that dropped curved black pods on the ground. I

boiled and softened the brown seeds I found inside and strung them into bracelets and necklaces. We also had a banana tree, on which grew the tiniest, sweetest, curled bananas.

My memories go on like this: snapshots of a back yard here, a brick building there. The details are scattered, an insignificant fragment of a life lived in scores of rented houses and dismal, unmemorable apartments.

And so we are edging closer to the ache's heart, the moving from place to place. Unending goodbyes. Getting lost walking home from school because I hadn't memorized the way. Or stabbing the toe of my new black leather shoe into the dirt bordering the blacktop, while I watched other kids together, run and laugh and play.

The sun rises, releasing itself from behind the bank's dark wall, and the magic is gone. I can't explain why the misty early mornings delight me. Yet I wish to try.

I grew up the youngest daughter of a career military commander. We were always in a hurry to leave. We had an ETD, an estimated time to depart, and an ETA, an estimated time of arrival. I'm not sure why we needed to race to the next unfamiliar apartment, only to listen to our voices echo through the empty spaces.

I used to think the constant change made for an interesting life. Wasn't I the girl who could step into a roomful of strangers and strike up a conversation? Didn't I know how to acclimate myself anywhere, even in a foreign country? Hadn't I learned to travel light, never accumulating or holding onto anything beyond what I could pack in two suitcases and a couple of boxes?

Along with places, I let friends go. Effortlessly, or so I thought. I write this just before the sun's rays splash against the river, bleaching the dark green water and causing it to shine. The pain in my belly starts to throb. I let go of best friends. Hillary and DeeDee, Cindy and Sherrie, Liz, Nancy and Janet. I learned to let go, as if people were just so much used and crumpled Kleenex.

The ache, I write now, is for a place that, lacking a better word, I must call *home*. The phrase, I recognize, is trite. I have spent the years since childhood—and there have been many—trying on places, like new coats. A vacation is enough to

have me imagining myself packing up and settling down in West Glacier, Montana, or Lihue, Kauai, or even in British Columbia, along the Sunshine Coast. If I've gained any survival skills during my migrant life, the ability to fantasize a place as home might be my best one.

The sun has risen higher and warms the deck now. It's time to take my jacket off. In an hour, the sun will be straight overhead and the temperature hot enough for shorts.

This warm inland air butts up against the cool wind lifting off the ocean, creating fog. If we drive twenty miles west, the entire rocky coast will be blanketed by air the color of stretched cotton. Late in the afternoon, once the sun drops, the fog will make its way upstream, settling down over the river for the night.

It's getting warm, as the bleached wooden deck begins to absorb and reflect sun. I want to write something else before heading inside, since the last words opened a space I would like to explore.

In this place of fantasy and wonder, I can imagine myself anywhere, even sailing through the air like a great blue heron or particle of fog. That's where the ache miraculously leaves me for a time. After all the goodbyes, the losses and grief and the abandoned apartments, this is the place I most yearn to come back home to.

Patty Somlo has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize four times, was a finalist in the Tom Howard Short Story Contest, and has been nominated for the 2013 storySouth's Million Writers Award. Her essay, "If We Took a Deep Breath," was selected as a Notable Essay of 2013 for Best American Essays 2014. She is the author of *From Here to There and Other Stories*. Her second book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories*, is forthcoming in January 2017 from Cherry Castle Publishing. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including the *Los Angeles Review*, *the Santa Clara Review*, *Under the Sun*, *Guernica*, *The Flagler Review*, *The Journal of Sustainability Education* and *WomenArts Quarterly*, among others, and in fourteen anthologies, including *Solace in So Many Words*, which won the Next Generation Indie Book Award for Anthology.