



Two Poems

by Lisa Liken

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Something to Hold On To

for Doug

In the Yurok tribe, when a loved one dies
the men cut their hair.
Scissors slice braids thick as boat rope.
Hair so alive, so lush, you wonder
if it feels the rip.

He hovers over the coffin, has forgotten
his tears at the Back Door Bar,
places the black braid
next to his closed-eyed mother.

We give up our hair so the Creator
has something to hold on to, he tells me,
to pull his mother to the other side -
a sacrificial braid to swoop mother up
like a kite into heaven.

When you died, Brother -
fashioned your own weapon
from a set of asylum sheets, with a rip
and a wring and a perfect running knot -

simply looped the tear drop noose
around your neck until it fit
too tight for life and twisted
your breath into death -

When you died, our vain father
gave up his hair.
Handfuls slid down the holes
of his hell. And what little was left

turned to silver-white ash.
Together we went to gather
the remains of your life.
An empty wallet and a knot of clothes
in a wrinkled paper bag,
so used it was soft as a dust cloth.

When you died, had I known,
I would have gladly sliced
my thin blond hair, year after year,

cut the sun-bleached strands
and braided them together to create
a rope-ladder. I'm unsure
about the heavens,
about this god and his power,
but there must be somewhere better
than where you've been,
my brother.

Why I Grew Up

At 9 - While I served up cocktails at our yearly New Year's Eve party, Mother announced to the crowd that to be perfectly honest, she disdained all children under the age of twelve.

At 20 – My dad stood by the head of the coffin. He was swatting flies and cursing the church because the cooler was broken. A fly flew up my grandmother's nose and didn't come out. My father closed his eyes, turned his head and said, Jesus Christ! Who's in charge of this place anyway?

At 32 - After a breakfast of saltines, I watched the dot on the test strip turn dark blue. Oh baby, don't worry your pretty little head, he said. He patted a bulge on his ass and added, I got the cash. When I woke up I saw the backside of the broad hipped nurse. She was humming "Ain't too proud to beg" and tapping the counter with a tongue depressor.

At 18 - At the end of a lunch shift, my boss leaned in and murmured, here kid, then handed me a scrap of folded paper. It read – call your dad. Shivering at a pay-phone I heard my father say, your brother is dead. He hung himself. He didn't leave a note. I squashed a water-bug with the heel of my shoe. I heard its shell snap. Dad, I said, I'm out of quarters.

At 19 - Mom called about the divorce. Asked if I would testify for her in court. When I asked why now, she said, somebody's going to get killed - and I'm not so sure it's me anymore.

At 21 - I told my Mom that I intended to marry a man who I was in love with but who was also my best friend. She choked on a gulp of vodka, let out a raspy Ha! and said, Jesus Christ, when are you going to grow up?

At 13 - My brother and I visited my mom at the mental hospital. My mom had her suitcase packed like she did every day. Joy, the nurse, began to unpack it like she did every day. She pointed to an empty cot and said to me, Well, look over there little lady, we're saving a bed for you!

Lisa Liken's poems have been published in *Jacaranda*, *Pearl*, *Slipstream*, *The Pitkin Review* and other small journals. This is her second publication in *SNReview*.

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