

Phantom Sister

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

Marlena comes to me on the cusp of sleep and wakefulness, when the world blurs grey. She soars through yellow-tinted waves, her bald shining skull pushing through water. Although she never speaks, she makes a gurgling sound, high-pitched like the bottle-nosed dolphins at the Aquarium. I look but never see her face. When I wake up, the bottoms of my feet sting as though I scissor-kicked through 100 laps. Those mornings I call in sick and sleep in the boat's hold. The gentle rocking hugs me.

My twin sister Maria lives halfway around the world in the Catoctin Mountains. She paints and writes poems about trees. We rarely see each other but the internet tethers us. Maria has the same dreams about Marlena -- we think of them as visitations — but she feels the ache in her chest, the left side, a sharp pain like someone has plunged in an icy hand and wrested out her heart. Afterwards she also feels an uncommon, exhausting peace. We wonder if this is how we tangled in our mother's womb: hands to feet to heart.

I find an old photo of the two of us, a college road trip to Baltimore. Our smiling faces squeezed together, the Washington monument towers behind us. I scan the picture, push send and the image zips to Maria's mountaintop. Seconds later, she writes back. "There's a hole between us." I look closer at the photograph and my soles burn.

