

Sundays and Shadows

At our family cookout on the beach,
my father holds a joint,
squeezed tight between his thumb and forefinger.
It looks to me like a candy cigarette--
sweet sugar smoke
from a thin strip of white
that turns to bubblegum.

He squints his eyes,
breathes in the smog.
White paper burns and shrinks
with each deep inhalation.

With each weighted exhalation,
he drifts further away,
hidden behind gray smoke,
bereft of sweetness.

He meets a woman
where the waves break on the shore,
follows salt crystal prisms in her hair
deep into the sand dunes
where sedge grass hides them from sun
and eyes
and me.

When sand no longer holds the warmth of day,
my aunt and uncle take me home.

[new stanza]

Even now, decades from that age of twelve,
charcoal and weed still smell the same.
The skunky smoke of both intermingle in my mind,
musky air to whet the appetite
for women who might pass by
and brittle burgers left too long on the grill.

I don't remember what we said
on Sundays,
our day together.

Through the smoke,
his face felt far away,
silent as stone.

Deadened by defeat:
a failed marriage,
a hated job,
a distant daughter.

Sometimes he smiled,
particularly when a pretty girl was near,
but that was rare.

It was often just the two of us.
He had no reason to smile at me.

When there was a girlfriend in his life,
he'd make jokes and buy me ice cream cones.

We spoke a new name;
a new perfume
cloyed to the vinyl seats of his Datsun B210.

Then that one would disappear
and so would the ice cream,
and so would the laughter.

I tried to fill the silence
with the only small talk
one so small can find.

On Sundays,
my father lying on the couch
staring at an open window.

Leaning over him,
I strained to see
what it was he saw.

[new stanza]

But I don't think he was looking at the trees
or the ornate shapes their shadows made on sidewalks.

I don't think he saw me
seeing him,
bending my body in ways that hurt
to try to find his view.

His vision clouded by his misery.

[new stanza]

Sundays with Dad always ended with the sunset;
that's when he took me home.

I tried to make those Sundays feel like fun,
or even look like fun,
as if we could pretend they were fun.

I wanted to bring Sunday's light
inside my father's darkness.

But he was stuck inside the shadows
and I was too small to pull him out.