

## Smiles in the Fog

It starts with the little things,  
those that seem unimportant,  
debris cluttering the brain:  
When to prune hydrangeas?  
How many cups of flour in the sugar cookies?

“I always forget,”  
she says smiling,  
“When did you say you’re coming to visit?  
Is it this week or next?”

We repeat and repeat,  
stifling the urge to exclaim  
“I already told you that!”—  
exasperation more fear  
than anger.

When it’s just the two of us,  
my brother and I,  
with furrowed concentration,  
we try to remember ourselves  
what it is we said,  
what it is she forgot.  
Amused  
somewhat  
that we can’t recall  
what our mother can’t remember.

She too laughs,  
“You know my memory,”  
she says with the smile  
of one who doesn’t truly know  
her memory.  
Because if she did,  
she wouldn’t smile.

[new stanza]

But we all smile.

Fog and smiles abound.  
Nobody knows for sure  
what's been said,  
what's been forgotten.

The doctor asks her to remember five words:  
cake, rainbow, money, book, purple.  
She can recall them immediately.  
With the pride of an elementary spelling bee champ,  
she recites them with a victorious smile.

But after a conversation of cholesterol  
and exercise,  
blood pressure and sleep habits,  
she can't remember one  
of those five words.

“Were there five?”

Too random, we say;  
no connection, we justify;  
you remember what's important  
we lie.

But is this how it happens?  
First the random words slip through,  
then the dates for pruning,  
the measurements in recipes.

There are levels of small:  
birthdays, graduations,  
the grandkids' ages:  
“They're not both in high school are they?!”

[new stanza]

And even that makes sense,  
can be justified,  
time ebbing and flowing  
then cascading—  
motions of moments always fleeting fast.

Hard to understand  
how infants  
become teenagers,  
how children  
become middle aged adults  
trying hard to remember  
what is it their mother has forgotten.

## Sundays and Shadows

At our family cookout on the beach,  
my father holds a joint  
which looks to me like a candy cigarette,  
with sweet sugar smoke  
that turns to bubblegum.  
He squints his eyes as he breathes in the smog,  
white paper burns and shrinks with each deep inhalation.  
Further away from me with each exhalation.

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

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

I don't remember any conversations  
we had on Sundays,  
our day together.  
Through the smoke,  
his face hung heavy,  
silent as stone.  
Deadened by defeat:  
a failed marriage,  
a hated job,  
a distant daughter.

[new stanza]

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.  
I learned a new name;  
a new, cloying perfume  
saturated 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.  
I would lean over him,  
strain to see what it was he saw.  
But I don't think he was looking at the trees  
or the ornate shapes their shadows made on cement 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.

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 just look like fun

as if we could pretend.

I wanted to bring Sunday's light  
inside my father's dark studio apartment.

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

# Lakeview Cemetery

Each morning  
I run the gentle hills of Lakeview Cemetery,  
a sanctuary in Cleveland, Ohio.  
Exalted statues look over me—  
black tears streak stone faces,  
sculpted gowns lifted and frozen in the sun.

Surrounded by dawn  
and one hundred year old elm and oak,  
I feel my life.  
I breathe  
my breath.  
One with the wind,  
I celebrate the morning.

Surrounded by names and dates of those departed,  
I flow into energy beneath form,  
I flow into the gratitude of now.

I am  
the graceful stone goddesses  
crying dark tears  
of joy.