

At the Breakfast Table

My mother's mumblings
bounce off the fold
of an omelette.

Is it a prayer
to follow ancestral gods,
or a childhood song
about crickets in a cage?

Most likely a complaint
that her eggs are cold,
words drowned in juice,
swallowed with toast.

What did you say?

My mother reveals
no secrets,
stares at my forehead,
speaks Japanese.

She slurps the last
of her coffee, demands
to smoke by smacking
her lips and drawing
her right hand,
scissors-style,
to her mouth.

I remember when
she was tall,
a woman in her prime,
who wore lipstick
thermometer red.
Mercury reaching
a hundred degrees,
a fevered life
of stretching
nylons over her knee,
parading smoke rings
across the air.

She would laugh in public
as she extinguished
each ember, leaving
ashtrays filled with filter tips,
headstones standing
in cold sand.

Men emerged
from the wisps,
silver lighters
in hand. Some offered
their favorite brands.
A few winked
at me, as they would
to a baby brother.
She sometimes
accepted their
benevolence,
clutching my wrist.

She showed me
how a pack of Salems
can act like a chugging
locomotive.
She pulled the wrapper
down an inch
and burned a hole
with her cigarette,
filling the chamber with smoke.
She let me slide
the cellophane
up and down,
releasing white clouds
that bounced off the ceiling.

She showed me, too,
how a match can burn
twice.

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