

## THE FIRST TIME I TRIED TO BE COOL

My mom left for work and there were  
three unopened packs of Marlboro Lights on the counter.  
She got them for her boyfriend in prison.

I took them and ran to the dirt pit,  
the boys from the trailer park were already there.  
We were all in fifth grade, I was the only girl.

They were tall and musky, black under their fingernails,  
chipped teeth, and bike-pedal scars.  
Their bodies looked like they lived years before them.

They drank all of the Bud Light  
they stole from their parents.  
They didn't save me one.

We peeled the cellophane with our clumsy little fingers,  
snapped the lighter until our thumbs turned red, and started chain-smoking.  
We pretended to inhale, quieting our coughs.

We held in our air with puffed cheeks  
then exhaled the smoke that never made it to our lungs.  
We were careful not to give away our secret of being uncool.

The earth underneath us wore on  
taking the shape of each of our bodies  
while our parents were at work, or pretending to work, or at the bar.

Some trailers had mailboxes, but most of them didn't.  
A lot of them were abandoned and condemned.  
There was no pavement, just metal boxes and rust.

We were always looking for some trouble,  
never talked about ourselves. We just got dirty and cursed at nothing,  
no one around to tell us to watch our mouths.

## FOR JANELLE

What if the cells of your womanhood  
slowed down and  
you were able to rise out of your bed  
like sun?  
You'd make cornbread and a bowl of buttermilk,  
talk about how you don't like my dad  
and how my mom is just so sweet.

What if you were able to get out of  
your nursing home chair  
and walk out of the front door?  
Like leaving a job you don't care for -  
we all know you have to be there,  
but really you could just go  
somewhere else to make a living.  
What if you could go home to heal?

What if you didn't die,  
but the cancer made you new again?  
Fell in love with the way Pawpaw  
says your name all over again?  
Gave birth to your four children again?  
We met each other for the first time again?  
You are the one that taught me  
how special it is to fall in love  
with something that isn't yours.  
What were your favorite parts of watching me grow up?  
You could relive those moments.

Now I understand the appeal of past lives,  
but I ask these questions so maybe I can stop  
missing you.

Maybe we have both been here before.  
Maybe you have died a thousand times,  
and I have sat here to write about you –  
a death I have never been prepared for.

I have felt this coming with every season change,  
every time a cold snap of breeze  
split against my skin, a warning:  
Do settle in.  
Do not trust your time.  
There is never as much as we think.

## **ANXIETY**

The dark dog sits hungry  
in my chest -  
hunting knife teeth  
toothpick ribcages  
the slow pour of saliva.

I know this hunger  
because it is also my hunger

and I'll spend a lifetime  
unlearning to feed.