

Bait

She sends her ten-year-old
boy into the bar to fish out
his father—a pool shark chalking
up his cue stick, wetting his lips
on dark bottles of beer, burning
the tips of his fingers from a dying
scroll of brown & crimson leaves.

She waits while her boy swims
past stools of pants & skirts, the blaring
of trumpets & tubas from a jukebox
glowing under a cursive neon sign
towards the open collar in the back,
the mustached man laying dollars down
for the next game, the next beer for
the brunette sharing his cigarette.

He sees the boy & exhales
a drag of smoke into the ceiling fan,
slams down the bitterness of beer & being
called out by a boy motioning to the door.

He follows the boy like a fish
he wishes to swallow, to wipe
his name off the food chain—a mouth
to throw chum bits of a paycheck to.

Outside the bar the boy listens
to their charged words, the slurring
& blurring of Spanish & English,
the splitting open of a wallet
& his guts of bills spilling out

for her pile of bills at home. He dives
back into the bar, his cue stick needing
more chalk, his tongue thirsting
for more bitter hops. She reels
her boy to her hand & they go back
home, hard & silent as a shell.

Doing Your Dead Father's Dishes

for Fred Sasaki

As I washed away the backwash
of your father's glass, the offering
plate for your grandmother's ashes
which held fruit so old & moldy
the apple & orange hardened
into a plastic feel & the last bits
of his spit clinging to a cold
metal spoon tongued smooth
of the ice cream it once scooped,
I thought I was cleaning my hands
w/his spittle & spirit, lathering
my skin w/the dust of his dead cells.

I know that's lurid & morbid to say,
maybe more than you care to bear
but my mother is still alive & my father
is unknown to me & could be a ghost
as well. Still I haven't had to clean
the kitchen of a lost loved one, to scrub
away the grime of leftovers, to strip
the bed of its sheets & pillows only
to see the yellow outline of what was
your father's sweat, the nights he turned
& twisted under the blanket feeling
the heat of dreams press onto his skull.

I imagine him waking from a hot sleep
& drinking a full glass of water in one
gulp for luck & constitution purposes.

I imagine him pulling back the curtains
to look onto the lake while stretching
the bones of his skeleton, his arms
reaching for ceiling, straining to gain
back the inches shed & lost, the light
of the sun flooding into his room
as it slowly rises over an expanse
of water blue & seemingly endless.