

Untitled (“Exposed to the Secondhand Nature of Smoke”)

By Adaeze Udeh

Exposed to the secondhand nature of smoke,
my father’s cigarette burned,
a silent confession
to what happened in a room with two wide windows.
He guarded the smoke, but I smelt the stench,
on his breath,
etched into his clothes,
trapped in the furniture, clinging to the air,
holding onto a man that refused to quit.

The presence of a Black man loud and unshaken,
reduced to the whispers of smoke
and the calling of ash,
his cigarette was never left behind.
Even when the wide-eyed daughter was not too far,
he smoked in desperation,
feeding an addiction.
He inhaled what would kill him,
inhaled the regret,
held it in his lungs,
as if exhaling meant surrender.
I watched him,
watched as the addiction endured,
turning into a need of survival
that kept him from breaking.

I learned that surviving isn’t pretty,
it smelled like burnt tobacco,
looked like a tired hand gripping a fading ember.
I learned to breathe through a haze,
to push when my body ached,
to carry on his silent burdens
without letting them bury me.

Endurance standing in smoke, refusing to choke on the ash,
resilience learning to walk in a determined body.

The air is thick in obstacles,
holding onto my name, my history, my fire,
strength in knowing that I was born in his shadow,
I will not be reduced to ash.