

Artificial Sweetener

I remember the sugar cookies
butter soft and sweet
enough to curl your lips into a smile. they left a little
grease on the fingers that smelled better than any
birthday cake hand lotion.
white linoleum tiles speckled with gray covered the floor
of the middle school cafeteria while the ceiling felt too low.

I remember sitting beside R----, watching B---- from afar.
the first crush that consumed me. before K---, before S--
or E---. even before C----, who I never even met in person.
he called me hysterical, I glowed in his compliments, but
now I think he meant unhinged.

I'm filling my mouth with memories
like I would cram sugar cookie
though my teeth,
a one-note sweetness
flooding me
before I learned to love complexity.
back then,

I was trying to run from who I had been:
bobcut, jello-eating kid wearing fish-patterned capris.

I remember how far I distanced myself from that child.
I grew my hair out, wore jeans even to bed,
and chafed against the forces trying to shape me.

I wonder what that version of me would say about cutting away
all that hair, wearing patterns again, and never blue jeans.
now I delight in peaches, still obsessed with sweetness, but
now I love the dusty fuzz I used to hate.
my teeth clack against the pit, and I wonder about
the spaces I hold inside me.

a blistering attic filled with the hard bodies
of wasps. the space my chest made for cello
music played by a brother who doesn't love me.

each day I'm swallowing
more hours, more pieces of the sky,
but where is the room for it?

To Put It Another Way

when I was young
I filled my mouth with empty
sweetness and covered my skin with
guilt. I was empty inside empty, trying
to fill myself
by eating more
empty.

the insubstantial names that made me fragile
broke me.
I thought his words were sweet but
they were like a broad, empty field
meant to bury me.

I loved
sweetness
because it was easy.
I wanted to hide
from the bitterness of rot
as the sweetness of the years
before
turned
to ashes.

I wanted to be empty of that.
wanted to wash myself of pain.
I'm still running away.

now I like the sourness on the underside of the skin.
now I am refilling myself with memory,
finding all
the empty reservoirs in my chest

and flooding them.