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The Earth and her Parents

by Courtney Conley

My parents have been smoking since I was five.

Large plumes filled the kitchen,
painting the walls charcoal gray.
The carpet smelled like ash
and I begged them to hire someone
A housekeeper, even a janitor,
just so I could feel clean for once.
They said money was tight.
My parents went out for drinks.

Google told me I have asthma.
Sometimes breathing hurts,
and speaking isn't worth the pain.
Food starts to burn my throat
like the cigs I began to smoke.
I try to learn hand signs
to speak to my parents.
They tell me,
"You're not deaf."
"Just speak, it's not that hard."
My dad cranks up the heater.

My parents have never owned a trash can,
at least I've never seen one.
If such a thing exists,
it's in a landfill or floating in the sea.
The takeout boxes go where they fit,
leftover pizza becomes the pets' dinner.
At least I've never had to buy cat food.
Plastic bags end up in the pool
that I swam in maybe once.
Last summer,
when the A/C still worked.

My pets keep dying.
They get into the takeout
Or they get into the pool
and they drown and they suffocate
and when the food runs low,
My parents do what they must.
I'm still hungry.

My parents let me drink bleach.
It was in the fridge
next to the gallon of water
and I was thirsty.
We didn't have a water filter,
never have.
Gallons were cheaper and "convenient"
and I'm still thirsty.

The faucet won't turn on.
I turn it on hot and it sizzles.
I turn it on cold and it sputters.
My face is covered in acne.
It's dry and its flaking
and it won't stop itching.
I tell my mom, she shrugs,
hands me the half gallon of bleach.

My parents think I'm independent now,
just as they raised me to be.
My parents say I'm doing "just fine".
I think I'm dying.
I'm starving and I'm dehydrated
and the air conditioning hasn't turned on in years.
The pool went dry last summer.
What color is the floor?
My parents tried their best,
and then they did their worst.
Then my parents stopped caring.
Which is worse,
choosing to kill your child
Or letting them die?
It wasn't their fault, not really.
But how could it have been mine?