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Salad Days

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Salad Days

There used to be smoke standing
on every corner and hovering
just behind each shoulder, sitting
politely at round tables ordering
food from teenaged waiters.
And I used to eat cigarettes,
chocolate wrapped in paper,
inside rooms wrapped in paper
and asbestos. We didn't know
so much and there is so much
we still don't know. My mother,
her curfew was sunset and
her seatbelt was her sister's
arm strapped across her chest.
My father first learned to type
on a sheet of printed paper.
Both have welt marks from
teachers' belts and twigs and
bloodied knees from kneeling.
My father's soles are callouses.
My mother's hands are raw. Once
she lashed a belt across my thighs.
Then she cried. And I still
scour sites for tastes of childhood
treats, buy jelly hamburgers
inside nostalgia stores. I have
at twenty-two enough books
to make a bygone king blush
with jealousy. I hold Plato
in my palm. I stand outside
and cast my eyes to the sky
where there's so much I can't see,
so much gazing down at me.

—Alix Brobbey

This poem won second place in the 2022
Clinton F. Larson Poetry Contest, sponsored
by BYU Studies.