

**Tamara Nicholl-Smith**

## **Ash**

I came here 12 boxes on an Amtrak train  
holding a fist full of too late love letters  
My car left a corpse in a Chicago parking lot  
I barely noticed the hills or the blue sky  
or the vastness of space between.

I came here to rid myself of myself  
of the cash register ring of Kinko's copies  
of the "Hey Honey" comments of cowboy hat wearin'  
policeman, contractors and low-end lawyers requesting "more fried okra please"  
of the round and empty marble eyes of men who said "make it a double"  
and "do you have a light?"  
I always had one  
I'd watched the flame extinguish on the match, smoke rise and curl in circles around cool  
desperate cigarettes,  
I wanted to take the spent ash and press it to their foreheads  
to call their souls back,  
as if it were Ash Wednesday and I was asking them to give up their own death for Lent.

I wanted to run out into the streets of storm and clouds and shout:  
*"save death for being dead"*  
run down Studemont, past the bar doors,  
past the grain silos, past the towers of smoke,  
to the graveyard  
where Stuart lay  
with his crushed lungs  
and arms like wings that took him soaring off the Corsicana cliff  
into the unsuspecting valley  
airlift to Tyler.

It took his lungs two months  
to finally collapse under the weight of smoke and glass.  
Standing at the altar of his crushed lungs,  
scattering rose petals to the wind,  
I whisper a promise:  
"I will save death for being dead."

The gray sky holds rain  
and their eyes are gray marbles filled with smoke and rain  
and their hands pass the time in three-hour poker games  
while spit cups overflow with pre-digested tobacco.

We have taken a ride out to the West side  
where the volcanoes sit  
distant protrusions.  
They sit quiet, surrounded by long dry grass moving in still waves.

This is where the earth spent its poison  
threw its fist up in black boiling red raged anger and said  
“get out of me that which does not serve me”  
and threw liquid rock from its belly.

I am here,  
with a handful of sky  
and a promise to be alive.

