My Smokescreen Inheritance

When the doctor brought us in,
I saw your face first
and your feet second—
and then just your feet.
Both black as that tobacco pinhole
in the eye of a cigarette.

Bruised lace wound around your ankles—
affectionate, like ugly cats
were rubbing against your legs,
dark paws scratching up
towards your varicose veins.

Then I looked at you,
met your distant, green-as-mine eyes,
but I could only think about your feet
and how you’d stepped in some
deathpuddle
somewhere along the way.

I held your hand tight
and kissed the thin, smoky feeling of your cheek.
I pretended I was my mother when you asked,
and I filed those death-ankles away
in the back of my mind.

They sit there still, dark and smoldering,
behind a smokescreen in my mind.
And now, when I see someone
hold a cigarette with practiced fingers
I can't help but think:
How do you feel about your ankles?

Abby Hertzler