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THREE POEMS

By IRIS JAMAHC DUNKCE

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Jhnsn

"Words say, Misspell and misspell your name
Words say, Leave this life" ---Michael Palmer

Jhnsn looked so correct reflected on
the tin-foil tray. Jhnsn, so plump in green
play-doh, rolled so carefully round and thin
by the arc of my five-year-old palm and
my arms leapt to the air waving like red-hot
thermometers, I was sitting on a
steam of coals, waving for response from the
warm round mouth of Mrs. Van Ness.

"No," slapped her full mouth
forward into my freckled face.
"No." With the shadow of her hand
she brushed away my morning's
sculpture, put the play-doh back
into the yellow can like a bad genie.

Then, pulling a thick, red
pencil from her hair,
so thick it took my whole hand
to hold it in mid-air,
her hand eclipsed my tiny fingers,
wove onto the rough brown paper
my properly spelled name.

And all day every single
five-year-old played
in their three-foot-tall way
with the treasures they'd pulled
from Mrs.. Van Ness' box.

They'd spelled right
the words, felt each letter
form from the paper to their
brain, to their play-doh-

stained fingertips

and carried their prize pinned
to their shirt:

 a scratch and sniff of gasoline,
 a pocket full of rainbow erasers.

My tongue has always been heavy.
For four years I was dragged
through the gray fog of school mornings
to the portable classroom
of the speech pathologist.

th--he'd say
 sssss---like a snake

and still my tongue sank
as if it held too many stones.

And when, in the fourth grade, I stood trembling
before an auditorium of eyes
I did as I should and stepped to the mike
repeating my spelling bee word: *Sheriff*,
my heavy tongue slipping on that bright star,
S---H---E---R---I---F, *sheriff*, I spelled,
just to leave that weight behind and sit down.

Cedars, Lilies, Stars

The cedars wrestle their boughs nervously.
We lie, weighed beneath possibilities.
Above, the still dark sky simmers—averse
to the damp rot of earth – the not yet knowing.
Venus will burn a hundred times awake
the stars, whose translucent down will simmer
until cedar branches illuminate
the lion-roar of the lilies' desire:
a new life nestled in their slack-jawed yawns.
Her face not yet seen -- a sky full of stars --
already bends to the weight of the dawn --
to the weight of what she will become: ours.
The down of dawn, that-rosy fingered bliss
We drown in the grenadine of love's kiss.

The View from Mercer Hospital, Pittsburgh, PA

--For Ken

Tantalus sits eleven stories up
pressed in glass--a cool eye skating the cool
river that interrupts in ice—below.
He is a man between--a butterfly
observed on pins: his own imprisoned face
reflecting back at him--a stranger, thin and
out of place. A gray man in a gray place.
Who wouldn't believe escape? That just
one bright apple, crisp to the lips, wet to

the touch, might be permitted. But, the tongue
recoils. The stomach sulks. The walls move in.
Until he no longer sees his own face
reflected back--just the cool, gray, river below
city, forever carried on its back.

Iris Jamahl Dunkle received her M.F.A. from New York University. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Case Western Reserve University. Her work has appeared in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Kaleidowhirl*, *Cleveland in Prose and Poetry*, *Thin Air*, *Fence*, *Squaw Valley Review*, and *Washington Square*. She's been teaching creative writing in both university and community environments for the past eight years.

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