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THREE POEMS BY JOSHUA CONKLIN

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My Father's Lips

If you could pull me apart,
peel back layers like string cheese,
you'd find peach flesh
ripe with anger.

Rage just beneath the surface,
a bubble ready to boil through oily skin.

I slip scorn in my pocket,
conceal it from the world.

Torment has been grafted to grey matter,
genetically coded by a furious
Y chromosome.

Outbursts look for a reason
to escape pursed lips,

more like my father's everyday.

He battered capillaries.
A tongue wet with bourbon and wrath, stalled all day
in his cubicle, released through coffee-stained teeth.

I swore to never erupt.
I'd escape the patriarchal metamorphosis.

But the genetic butterfly always escapes.

Now, I sit at my computer,
mind cramped with craft,
blood simmering frustration,
looking for a way to say

I understand,

I'm sorry,

I love you.

Lettering

I didn't know what I had. I'm sorry. You were right.
I didn't mean it. The moon doesn't whisper anymore.
I should have. I want you. Please take me back.

Yours always,

(Insert ex-girlfriend here)

Letters lined with desperation
and perfume
I stuffed them in a box.

Returned when I needed
a boost of self-confidence.
Fingered words,
let reassurance
run down my throat
and fill veins with old stimulants.

Blame is too strong.

We broke each other's hearts
over the knees of passion
and youth.

I think of the skin we shared,

wonder if on lonely nights
they smell the lingering promises in my old poems.

I open the box and
take them back,

I take them all back.

Neo-Cortex Nightmare

A shooting star, brighter in his peripheral vision,
streaks the desert sky. A camouflage headlamp lights
a leather journal and a chewed pen taps a blank page
in staccato. Words burst between his ears, but he
cannot shape them into sentences.

He wants to forget the last few hours. Leave them on
the pillow, like a dream startled by the cat, faded
from memory by morning.

But the detonation of language will not subside. So he
sits, occasionally scribbling thoughts. He finishes
the story with his rifle still cocked and catches a
few hours sleep before an 0800 departure.

Dreams pulse with fish and reptiles. Scaly visions

thrash violently through his mind.

Awaking, thoughts drift to a high-school classroom, his teacher who noted the archaic brain components we share with reptilian ancestors. But explained man's development of the neo-cortex deepened his compassion. Primitive urges were repressed and civilization developed.

They're delayed again; it's likely they'll remain camped another day. He picks up a pen but his eyes are heavy. He wonders if, after evolution has once again turned the page, some creature might dream of the deeds of men.

Joshua Robert Conklin recently earned an MFA in Creative writing from Goddard College. A teacher by trade, he is currently devoting a year to exclusive work on writing projects including poetry, short fiction, and a family memoir. His poetry has been featured at *Wild Child Publishing* and is forthcoming in *Ocean Magazine*.

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