F Word

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Josh Mathews

I heard the word in church,  
in the local Baptists’ basement,  
from a kid named Frank, who spoke it  
as if a firecracker had shot out  
from his cackling mouth, the sparks  
tickling his cheeks, and instantly  
I knew, even at five, I knew  
from the explosion that followed that  
the word was a powerful projectile,  
a deadly smart bomb that tunneled through  
my ear canal, buried itself in my brain,  
then kaboomed,  
shaking, cracking, crackling, fracking  
open pathways burst wide by sound.

But our mothers refused to let us  
use this weapon, so we  
handled the bomb with care,  
ever flinging the deadly explosive for fear  
that our firecracker tongues would wreak havoc  
upon innocent minds and give them  
knowledge of the power of the bomb.  
Instead we kids flung duds—flipping, effing, freaking—  
substituting the word for words, causing  
no collateral damage, no bombing and fracking  
like Frank had done to me.

Still the tension of possessing the weapon—  
I inwardly repeated the explosion  
in moments of rage and tension—  
gave cause for private bomb-throwing sessions.  
(Their fun, you surely know, lasts only seconds.)  
Remaining polite, we kids continued our freaking  
and plucking, our fake tough-guy talking, fearing,  
as many still do for Frank’s sake,  
and for all Christian children in basements,  
the word I learned in church.