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F Word

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The F Word

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,
never 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.