

Ode to My Father's Hands

In the backyard of a shotgun house out in Butchertown,
he and his older brother sit side by side, the closest they'll ever be
as their mother hoses the creek mud off of them,

her cigarette delicately perched between cinnamon-red hot
nails. The silver cross on her neck catching the sunlight like
a cat catches a bird in its teeth. He was always a mama's boy,

holding her hand even as she lay in a blindingly sterile
hospital bed, clasping one frail, well-manicured hand
around her rosary, praying to God that she may dwell

in the Lord's house all her days, and, please, protect her
boys. Cracked hands covered in flakes of cement and mortar
since they were 18, leaving the Bluegrass for the Everglades,

gripping onto a surfboard during the genesis of a hurricane,
relishing in the chaos frothing in rabies-white at the ends
of the murky walls of water, his own recklessness cleansing

his skin in the form of rain's frantic hands
and their downpouring pelts. He finally returns
to what had been his mother's home, now too quiet

without her hands dancing across kitchen countertops,
her nails tapping out short beats on a specter organ
as she sings a hymn from last Sunday's service.

Callused hands, decorated with scabs of dubious origin,
their ancestors marked in raised white lines on hide-shaded
skin, scoring his years of hard labor like a time clock.

Layers of dirt and metal shaving under fingernails,
archaeological finds scraped from their graves
after each shift, now shearing potatoes

in long ribbons with a paring knife, bumping the old
growth callouses with each turn of the vegetable. He mimics
his mother's rose-scented hands and their waltz about the kitchen

as he guesses one of her recipes. His breath flowing
through yellowed teeth as he whistles a baritone
tune of some hymn his mother used to sing.

His daughter watches as his hands toss cubed potatoes
into the pot, her small hands reaching to hand him another,
the way she carefully observes every finger

reminds him of his own childhood, spent
in the barrel of the shotgun house, watching
as his mother's hands move seamlessly like the needle

on a record while his own small hands flutter about
like stale fish flopping on hot, gulf-coast beaches. Somewhere
in his adoration of his daughter, he hears his mother's laugh.