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## How to Be Held

Andrew Collard  
*Western Michigan University*

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## How to Be Held

1.

The room's so thickly shadowed, as in memory,  
that any point of focus dissipates beneath my gaze:

the soft click of the rocking chair, irregular  
against the humming of the box-fan, and the murmur

of occasional cars along the avenue, secures me  
in my faith the ceiling holds above us, somewhere,

that the woven blankets I've nailed across the window  
to keep the shadows in, and help my son to sleep,

still hang. On my bad days, I would call the constellations  
my mind conceives to root itself in place

no more than an illusion, the lines I trace between  
his weight against my chest, the walls concealed

in the dark beyond us, and the sidewalks, so accustomed  
to our steps, below, no more than an imagined safety.

The route from home to homeless is too trivial a distance  
to be measured, the way an injury can be revealed

in total stillness—fractures due to loss of bone mass, say—  
or how, at thirty, I can't recall a single night

my mother held me, though I know they numbered  
in the hundreds. What could those arms, which then

seemed limitless in strength, have gifted me  
but reassurance, through the tenderness of my containment,

that my breaths were little harmonies beneath her breath,  
and that the roof would keep the wind out, if only

for a single evening, so I, in my ease, could free-fall  
to a heavy rest, as my son does now, as I gently

double over, lips pressed to his still-wet hair,  
to lower him toward the dark warmth of his crib.

2.

The silent movie of my dream recedes.  
A noise like a disposal crushing glass

wakes me with a start. Muddled cries  
spill from the monitor beside the bed.

When I rise to draw the blind,  
there's nothing, beyond the empty bus stop

and the dubbed yards of grass, sick as newsprint  
beneath the streetlight's buzz.

Some incidents of sense are inexplicable:

Four hours ago, a dozen strangers  
shuffle off the bus, and migrate

from the curb to the apartment complex  
across the road, stopping traffic

like a parade, or a herd of deer,  
like the spectacle of fire among the trees—

3.

In 1999, a pastor told me of a hole inside my heart,  
a dark space only faith in god could fill.

Imagine my unhappiness to find, years later,  
he was partly right. The hole was never in my heart,

but in the afterlife which, years into imagining,  
I still found difficult to picture. The hole

was in the locales on the nightly news, and how  
they never looked much like my neighborhood,

the misplaced history of what's happened in-between  
so many wars. For the infinity of childhood,

the world expands up and out forever, beyond the whispered  
consolation of our parents, the cracking drywall,

the backyard's maple trees and swingset, beyond the neighbors

and their leaky pool, the takeout joints and counters,  
beyond the highway, too, and into hypotheticals,  
the places built more from assumption than from earth,  
until, one day, the world begins contracting.  
Even the city's cleanest corners bloat with the grief  
of their own impermanence, crying out at nightfall  
through the blank stare of the billboards and neon lights.

We stumble down the sidewalk like bargain gumshoes,  
scrutinizing the alleys for something that's been lost  
though we've forgotten what, only certain of its being  
in our lack. I forget myself to sleep and wake past comfort,  
adrift, the sickness too entrenched for treatment. The hole  
is in the surf, unsettled, where a raft of refugees submerged  
mere miles off unfriendly coast. The hole is in the weakening smile  
of the boy, dying of leukemia, I sat behind in third grade,  
and in the hollow peace of how, yesterday, I didn't recognize him  
in my yearbook, features clouded when I look too close.

4.  
What can I call this impulse to unwrap motif?  
In the waiting room, bubblegum cigars sit bunched  
inside their little blue box, each a fuzzy reproduction  
of the other, beside a vase of wilting roses.  
The petals drop at their own uneven pace, each unique  
in its design like the strange array of faces gathered  
here, plucked from disparate moments in my history,  
reclining together over islands of chairs.  
Distant relatives, acquaintances, and friends  
converge, some laughing over half-emptied  
cups of coffee, some rocking absent-mindedly  
or pacing, anxious for a glimpse, however fleeting,

of the familiar stranger sprawled against my chest,  
of the way his eyes, untrained to process

all but light and motion, are a match for mine,  
of how even this cluttered room invokes *collage*,

each distinctive shape emerging to the sterile canvas  
until, somehow, a whole becomes discernible,

a structure unfolding from the darkness  
that will hold him when my arms no longer can.