

HARDEN PUTTY TONGUE

EMERGE i am told, but had I
not when I dove—purple, hairless,
soft—into **sterile** white frost: metal and tile
reflect feverish light
over my moist sealed eyes, unwelcome
first breath I choke on blackened
dust—sounds
ring, tunnel ears, my face twists
in gapping mouth as tongue jitters
release—nothing to speak
on this nudity
seemingly naked—irritable
I trumpet back their filthy
air...had I not

when pink putty tongue
stumbled out: *pa'-s'ghetti...spa'*,
spa'...pa'-s'ghetti no...spa', *spa'*
pa'-s'ghetti AH! you know what I mean
even if it lifts the first letter
like a bandit jumps head of the heard, wrangle
back across train-tracks
before **horse-boy** gathers his wits as
an engine tumbles over any
elegant rescue-&-justice—
spaghetti—...had I not

when red rubbery tongue leapt
across: bonding boys and cliquing girls
how lovely your ebony hair
like the mane of a mare; eyes sharp,
grow slow
turn toward elastic source, and
screech—*EEEWW! Do you like me?*
This BOY Likes ME—SNAP
tongue stamps my forehead, I slink
in bus seat, head burying
in cool window...had I not

when name skipped tongue to tongue:
girls crowd with glee, one
chosen to unfold the eight-&-a-half-
by-eleven note, eyes fix
on my black stallions' gallop
across thin blue lines
as if these words lift over horizon
onto each tween tongue, a moment
that cocky boys allude
yeah, I like ya'...had I not

when tongue blackened hot
ruby, steamed in its cracks: voice
plummet, audience silent
to my glare, fist know on sky
like hooves rattle heaven's gate—**engulf**
onlookers' **fear** that pulsating
distortion jades youth—to *hide*
in the dark
in the shadows of the trees,
only place
handlers never wrangle...had I not

when cold allusive beer
iced enflamed tongue: tied
outside myself like a cowboy's buck
unable, unwilling to perform; still
mares, without shame, approach—*tonight*
I am dancing with girls
I just met, breasts like—scratch that,
walk away and
rewrite—*the night*
dances me like a gelding
while these throbbing busts illude...had I not

when sobered tongue regained
cream-&-crimson: cap and gown
saddle this wild Indiana colt, I
among the lot
but, as my school is called, I exhale—
ready—nostrils flare, stride
like pure bred and break
stampede, I—
Hoosier brood—live
without question
who's there...had i

not *EMERGED* no word
could reign this tongue, gird scarlet
tight, and ensure release slow: breath
warms bitter frost, unsheathe
purple-pink-ruby blade—only tool
I strip naked among colleagues, friends, family
and strangers-to-be-friends,
-to-be-colleagues—carve ever subtly
portraits of eyes' captives, etch
grooves onto lingering air; this
air up here! and fill it, our place, this
space in deep question, tunnel **the** apple and
whisper to its seed *emerge, emerge,*
emerge from the safety of the dark.

—J. Jacob Barker