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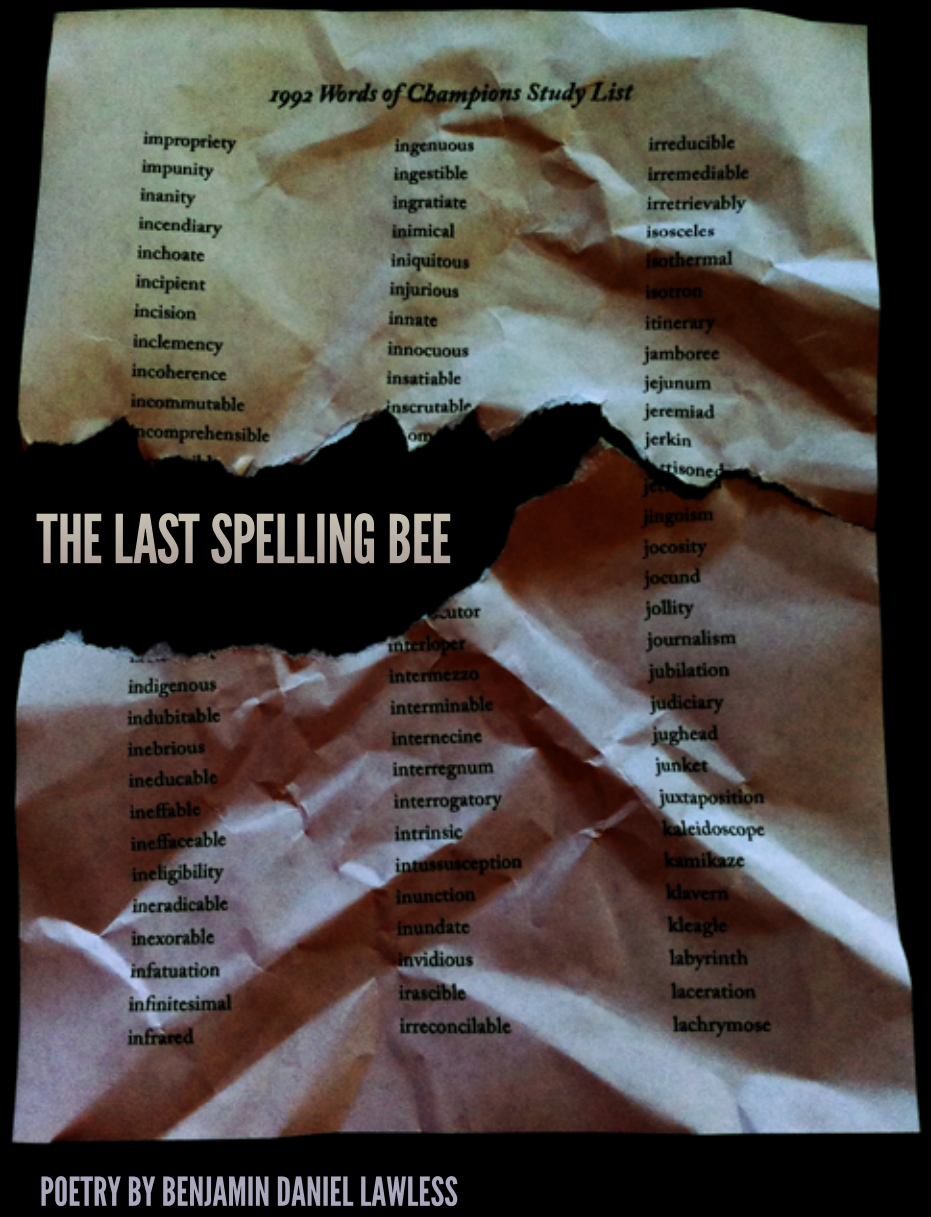

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# The Last Spelling Bee

*Poetry by Benjamin Daniel Lawless*

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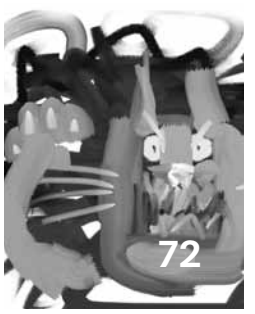

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For my dog and my cat:
*should you ever develop the gift of language,*
*I hope your poems about me are kind.*

For me, circa 2000:
*Sorry I'm not who you thought I'd be.*
*Don't worry, you'll get over it.*

# Clawed

This could have been the greatest work
of literature that you, I, or even
Billy Collins could have dreamt
if my cat wasn't perched on my chest right now,
my bed creaking under our combined weight.
Without moving, he somehow leaps from muse to distraction.

There's laptop in lap and
thoughts dipped in a long milky purr.
I can barely hack my way through a jungle
of words and whiskers.
But when I absentmindedly tuck my fingers
under his cheek it's like a syntax error.
A claw hooks itself into my lip.
*Focus,* he says. *If you weren't such a*
*self-centered big bastard,*
*I'd eat you whole.*

But all I hear is
write me my masterpiece
so I can ignore you again.

# Johnson Elementary School's *Last* Annual Spelling Bee

Men do stupid things for women,
and in sixth grade I learned this
when Kennessa Marshall bet fellow classmate Brigham Toskin
twenty-five whole bucks
that I'd take first place in the spelling bee.

I stood onstage,
a snap-on dangling from my collar
and the microphone growling at my nose.

First word was "jocund."
My mouth became an aquarium,
algae sticking to my cheeks over a fake coral reef
and the word "jocund" lay sideways on the surface,
dead for what tasted like years.

*Please use it in a sentence*, I stammered.
The judge could tell I was stalling, but still he repeated
my word, that rotting fish,
and then snidely chirped "She felt jocund despite bad circum-"

and he never finished
because right then the windows
on all sides of the auditorium shattered.

Seats rumbled and doorways splintered.
The earthquake crawled through the aisles
and split the stage open like a pomegranate.



The rest of the contestants, still in their chairs,
fell through what was left of the stage
straight to the molten core of our planet.
There were no survivors.

And that's how I won my sixth grade spelling bee.

vin. A win is a win. A win is a win. A win is a win. A win is

n is a win. A win is a win. A win is a win. A win is a win. A

vin. A win is a win. A win is a win. A win is a win. A win is

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n is a win. A win is a win. A win is a win. A win is a win. A

n. A win is a win. A win is a win. Right?

# Diameters & radii

My sister made me a friendship bracelet,
gave it to me under a stargazer's sky in Santa Margarita.
The first time it wrapped around my wrist,
I watched her train leave the station.
I felt every atom of the cotton blend and
every nanometer of it's circumference echo her call,
beckoning me back to where I grew up.

Even though San Diego feels as far away as Saturn's rings,
the bracelet is invaluable. It's my assistant,
mapping my orbit home,
my path prescribed in the twist of
green and orange knots.

It may look like billions of miles but really
it's just four hundred. Really it's just
16 centimeters of yarn. When I drive home,
the car's wheels rotate 108 million times
and every bump and jostle of the highway
make the 42 knots around my wrist sing.
When finally I stop, she's waiting
at the top of the stairs.

She's been orbiting too.

And finally, we hug, spiraling closer
like the two hands on the face of a clock.
Finally these diameters between us
halve into radii, and then into a single point
and I'm home.

# My 400 HORSEPOWER cardboard box

I drew the world as I drifted around the turn,
a crayon savant speeding through in six walls.
Pedestrians were nothing but blizzard blue stuffed animals
walking to their jazzberry-colored stuffed jobs.

I've always been the fastest.
Mom called me Lead-foot Lawless.
Other cars called me the atomic tangerine speck in the distance.
I'm the best driver there is.

Mom gave me a ticket once,
but I was able to get out of it
by eating my broccoli. I even found an agency
that insured against apple juice spills.

In my burnt umber cardboard box I was free,
weaving through snowy mountain passes and neon car chases,
and really, I was able to tip over and out anytime.

Now, my car lacks imagination. I'm twenty-seven
and I drive to the store, to the job, to the post office.
I drive the empty spaces between errands.
I pass the gray trees, gray sky, gray sun.

# Grandpa gets that “far away” look

Not easy growing old.
First, you forget what made youth miserable.
The vines and weeds struggle through the sidewalk
and the front porch sags.

Spring comes again and you get a Corvette,
new tanned legs to trace
with your fingertips.

You forget what made youth fun
and the attic starts crumbling,
daylight slips slowly into dark hallways.

Then winter,
you make sure your new roof doesn’t leak,
every window’s closed and locked.
Settle softly with the furnace,
your favorite blanket, the endless night.

# the miracle of bread into blood

He swung the chain into my skull,
heavy metal through San Diego air.
Rust peeled off chains in hispanic hands.
Two of them. A year older than me.

Ten years old, I was walking home
with a loaf of Wonder bread.
They passed me on the ghetto sidewalk,
leaned on their heels and struck.

The chain dropped me,
the jabs and hooks kept me down.
Then I was less than one, back in the womb.
Warm, bloody and fetal.

God help me. I hurt.

I bled on the story of Jesus,
and the why that passed his lips before death.
On the cross I looked to those crucified next to me,
and saw the hispanic kids' faces, terrified.

I learned pacifism from you, Lord.
And from that holy word I earned punishment.

Christ performed a miracle,
feeding a mob with some bread and fish,
but I returned home breadless.
The loaf was the last thing they took from me.
All I had for my family
was bruises. Blood.

The DJ sits in a barely lit room.
Constellations of dust swirl
between his lips and the microphone.
He speaks in silken tone.

He whispers and the sound carries
to the empty corners of bedrooms,
to the open fields outside town limits,
to the ionosphere.

His whispers travel farther and the words
politely excuse themselves out of the Milky Way.
They wander the cold static of space
until finally, some kind of life hears him.

It wakes up from a dark sleep
under a different sky of stars.
Its cardiovascular system stirs to life.
It lifts its head, antennae twitching.
Radio-telescopic eyes look deep into the Milky Way.
The words have awakened something
more powerful than neuron pulses.

Three of its fifteen hearts begin beating.

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