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Gum

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G. Wesley Houp
Gum

Sunday mornings
and clean grit gathered
in the bottom of
my mother's purse.
Protestant, evangelical
purse-dirt somehow
worked into the gum-cache
through paper and foil wrap.
And this at a critical time
when hell was
where Brezhnev connived
the final holocaust,
conducting Satan's
all-day workshop
on the destruction of
capitalist optimism
about life,
his red megaton pitchforks
aimed at perky
blue dollar signs
on the dry-erase board.
And I, heir apparent
To the kind of Western
Pomp that had driven
Khrushchev to his shoelaces,
having dredged
an alluvial stick
from the delta
of my mother's purse,
chewed out of complete
and utter boredom
with my own imminent
annihilation
and subsequent eternal
damnation
till my jaw ached
and Ananias
told me what kind
of man Jesus was:
a man who suffered
even the naughtiest
children come unto him.

The particular,
clean essence of spearmint
reminds me of passive-
aggressive participation
in world religion—
iconic doodling on
the back of tithing envelopes;
the time I choked
on communion grape juice
and had to exit
the entrance,
Judas of some ambiguous deceit
that involved egg
on one's face
or in this case,
Christ's blood on one's shirt
but no wine.
I gasped past half-
dozing ushers to the bathroom,
and then beyond
my mother's reach,
out a side door,
inevitably down into the world.

In the family of Christ
I figured I was a third,
maybe fourth cousin.
But I've always held his blood
thicker than water,
and though I haven't
taken communion since,
spearmint gum
reminds me of all
threats that have come and gone,
unknown and known to me,
of how brief
and unpredictable life can be,
and how in the absence
of profundity
frivolity profounds itself
in the deep vein
of our memory,
in our mother's purses
or in our pockets
like lent for a diamond.