

# Concrete

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*after C.K. Williams*

On the hundred-degree summer days  
we hauled bags of concrete up six flights of stairs;  
with the buckets, tools, and heavy mixer  
made heavier by the caked-on concrete  
hardening faster than we could scrape it off.

Even the most level headed of us held nothing back,  
spraying the place with curses, and each other  
with the concrete—tools and buckets, bottles thrown  
across the room: none of us free  
from the choking strain of heat

except the boss, thirty-something, veteran  
of Iraq: three years a Marine, three on an aircraft carrier reading  
every book in the library. I asked him once  
how he kept it together: *when you've seen men  
vaporized by IEDs, nothing else bothers you.*

He said it simply, like a child, his simplicity splintering  
on me like a light-struck prism, in the pickup truck  
now impossibly fleeced with a million grey specks,  
shedding from our shirts, spreading  
over every surface. I was suddenly afraid

that whatever it was I was, it wasn't enough;  
that I would at any moment be revealed for what it was I was.  
And what was that? The old question: something now sunk,  
deep in my seat, hardening between cushions,  
indistinguishable as the grey chips

sloughed in the mess of the car:  
the space between what is ordered, known,  
imperceptible in the dark. It seemed easy  
to him, to know and live his role, the job  
a kind of calling, lost on me.