

## Conditioned

*by Noel Sloboda*

The old nuns smelled like mothballs  
but moved silently as shadows,  
rulers flashing suddenly, our knuckles  
bloodied while judgments lashed  
deep beneath the skin.  
Mother Maura could not accept my brother  
writing with his left hand—  
the way of darkness and the Devil—  
no matter that his letters  
looked sharper, more symmetrical  
than those of other boys in class,  
almost too perfect for this world.  
She used an entire roll of masking tape  
to fix the pencil in his right hand,  
and he bore down, face puckered  
as if he held the wrong end of a hot poker.  
Mother Maura summoned her sisters  
as witness to his efforts at reform  
and they cooed at the tangle  
of razor wire that was his name.  
He had to keep his left hand  
in his pocket for the rest of the school year  
to make sure the cure took.  
Decades later, those rare times he writes,  
I never look at his cards, unable to make sense  
of the manic scribbles. I worry  
his wife will call to complain

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about the bank rejecting their mortgage checks.  
But on the phone, whenever we think back,  
my brother always gives thanks to the nuns,  
especially Mother Maura, swearing  
he would not have turned out  
the same man without them.