

The Card Players

By Calvin Forbes

A fourth was needed so one of the three
Invited a friend and I came along as a spare
In case a chair was empty since I could fill
In as easily as I could shout out a rhyme.

As the jive flowed like the River Jordan
And Joshua and his trumpets sounded the alarm
The winning cards slam damned on the table
And I laughed along with morning noon and night.

My three big brothers: bold smart handsome.
One slim as a stick of dynamite, the second solid
As a line backer and the third crazy enough
To fight them both if they let it roll beyond talk.

Treated me like a child even after I had my first.
The three of them (ace king and a wild card)
Improbably born within four years as if Daddy
And Momma were trying to break a record

Or win a bet about how many diapers a woman
Could change in a single day without cursing
The hand God had dealt her; the odds were even
Until I came along years later to tell their story.



Calvin Forbes teaches writing, literature, and jazz history at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Blues and jazz inform both the rhythm and content of his poetry. He often uses ballads to tell family stories or the ups and downs of romance. But Forbes updates the tradition with surreal techniques, epigrammatic humor, and changing voices. He described his work as “simplicity shackled up with complexity.”