

*Brian Brodeur*

## COUSINS

for David Brodeur (1976-2011)

1.

Last night, after the Air Force official  
told your folks what happened to you in Kabul,

your brother called. I almost didn't answer.  
The bullet to the face, which you survived,

pierced one cheek, he said, then the other,  
but you rose from the floor and staggered after

the man who'd shot you, grabbing for his hand  
as a second bullet severed your spinal cord.

I was going to say it was too much to hear,  
but I didn't have the right—You weren't my brother.

He called you a hero, asked if I had any questions.  
"Questions?" I said, and he hung up the phone.

2.

It was rare to get the three of us together.  
When you flew into DC, we drove to Skyline Drive

in separate cars, and hiked the Whiteoak Trail  
to see if the falls were running. They were dry.

On a gravel path, fresh piles of horse dung  
swarmed with monarchs and swallowtails

who feasted on something they'd found there.  
For a long time we watched their wings

opening and closing in the hot wind,  
their bodies pulsing with what resembled

pleasure, their legs and forked tails trembling,  
their abdomens thick as pinky fingers.

3.

I don't know why I'm telling this to you.  
You were there. You saw the butterflies, the view

of the Shenandoah Valley from the falls.  
Draining my water bottle, I coughed and wheezed—

I promised to join the gym and quit smoking.  
Your brother walked ahead. You stayed behind.

We parted at the lot—I can't remember  
if we shook hands before we found our cars.

In my rear-view, the sun blazed off your hood,  
slices of light flashing as you entered.

Your windshield glinted as if lit from within.  
It hurt to look at you is what I mean.