Little Heart Attacks
Erika Enk

I don’t mean to make you cry.
I mean nothing, but this has not kept you
From peeling away my body, layer by layer,
The tears clouding your eyes...
—Suji Kwock Kim

My baby brother hated onions.
Sitting next to Mom, five years old, he clutched his chest
I can’t eat onions! They give me little heart attacks!
Years later, when we served onions
With midwestern tacos or bratwurst,
Someone would ask (and we would all wait for it)
Remember how onions would give AJ little heart attacks?
And we would laugh.

Nine years ago today,
AJ was found in an empty parking lot
On the south side of Milwaukee.
I am not sure if the needle was still in his arm
When the paramedics pulled him from his truck.
Nor was I there when the doctor sat my parents down
And told them despite heroic efforts,
I’m sorry, your son is dead.
But, I imagine Mom clutched her chest
And wailed in pain.

Two days later,
I identified his body at the funeral home
Before they returned him to dust.
Take your time, the director whispered
While Dad waited outside.
Behind closed doors,
He lay heavy in a cardboard box,
Draped in a blue hospital gown.
Rotting like onions in a crate,
I touched my hand to his cheek.