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Cameroon

Mary Ann T. Davis
Denison University

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Cameroon

The word is enough. She guides
us in the enunciation
learned from a semester of watching

their mouths mold
around the syllables. She wears their
clothes with ease,

drums their instruments between her knees
and touching each part,
names the animals skin used.

It must have changed
something in her, I watch her hands
in the photos I peel apart,

I watch her stitch clothes
for the natives,
cradle their brown generations

in the cupping white
of her palms, and in the frame frozen
with blood,

when she sliced into *la poule*, clotted
feathers falling
to her shoes, the pictures didn't

show the later
skinning, the plucking of meat
from bones that evening,

crouched low on aching heels,
exulting in the kill,
lives widening into others

through death, necessary.
As needed as the chickens my
grandmother

would ring life from, baring her hands
in the heavy Indiana
heat, my mother in pigtailed tucked

behind her ears,
feet tucked into the bottom rung of the gate.
Granddad was dead

line break

and uncle was due anyday now, and
in the moment the chicken's
head came off in grandmother's fist, my mother

understood. She didn't
cry; she was hungry. She ate the chicken
grandmother served

with red-cruled fingernails that night,
she ate for her mother
and her future baby brother, she learned

to eat like visitors
in a starving country relearn what food is—
on their knees, bringing

the animal down themselves, clumsy
and careful in their hunger.

—Mary Ann T. Davis '01