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SORTING THROUGH THE RECORDS

Jack Ridl

"I'll toss the ones I'll never listen to,"
 my mother says, "or give them to Grace
 who'll sell them at the Lutheran Home."
 I can see my mother dusting each record,
 setting aside the ones she doesn't remember,
 finding ones that take her to the dance floor
 where she jitterbugged, fox trotted, slow
 danced with my father. "I can still see us.
 Dancing to 'Polka Dots and Moonbeams.'
 My dress had polka dots. I know that's dumb."
 It was 1940. The war was waiting
 for my father. He graduated, the next day
 took a bus to boot camp, became the captain
 of a black company and slogged through the mud
 of France and Belgium, then into the jungle rot
 of the Philippines. Through Basic, he ate, slept,
 bathed with the white soldiers, used the whites only
 toilets, drank from the fountains just for whites.
 At the day's end, he saluted his men,
 then dismissed them to their sergeant. "I thought
 that's just the way it was," he said only once,
 his brow furrowed like the rows the tanks cut deep
 in the camp dust. Every week, he wrote my mother
 ending always with the same P.S. "I know this war
 will never end." She waited. One New Year's Eve
 he sent her violets from France. She pinned them
 on her coat, stood outside, listened to the clang
 and clamor of midnight. Tonight she'll play
 Frank Sinatra singing "I Bought You Violets
 for Your Furs." Later in the week, she'll go
 to her line dance lesson with some friends.