

POETRY

by Jason McCall

Are They Black Owned?

He spent most of my childhood nights as a chef
in a Montgomery hotel, but
my father doesn't care about the chef
who catered all the movies he didn't have time to watch
or the chef who spent all that time on Food Network.
He doesn't care about white sauce
and the debates around whether it counts
as a barbecue sauce, a dressing, or just another weird gift
from the gods of North Alabama.
He doesn't care about the whiskey selection
at the restaurant we use to make the visitors feel
like there's a real food scene in our city.
He doesn't care about the meat and threes
in Florence tasting more like East
Fairview or West Fairview.
He doesn't care about much
enough to ask twice about it, but he asks again:

Are they black owned? He only cares
that the plates I can afford because of my new job
help put food on another black family's plate.
He doesn't care to talk about lunch counters
and marches and firehoses and bombs and
water fountains and doors
he couldn't dare touch, and I don't care to ask
because the only thing worse than living
in hell is being asked to return as a tour guide
for a son who comes home twice a year.
He only cares about making me
remember everyone who's sitting at the table with me.





When It's Hard to Name Your Favorite Restaurant Because It's Hard to Name the Dead

I can't skim pictures of the dead
malls and make a joke about the late

stages of capitalism or what the loss
of a Sbarro means for the fabric

of America. I won't write an elegy
for all the times I put a coin on a greasy arcade

cabinet and claimed my spot in the world
like De Soto marching through Chickasaw lands.

There's room for someone
to write a postmortem manifesto

on supply and demand, on evolution,
on the internet, on Amazon.

I won't speak ill of the dead
shopping centers because somewhere

in Montgomery Mall there's a ghost
of a scared boy who never felt loved

in the world more than when his mother let him tag
along for the day. Like every god, the boy's mother

had her own day of the week,
and Thursdays were her day to run

clothes back to Gayfers or bring
lime suckers back from Regions for the boy

who loved banks because he didn't know
there were other places to get lime suckers.

On a good Thursday, the day never ended
without a lunch at Morrison's Cafeteria.

The boy didn't know Morrison's was an Alabama
company and he didn't know he was taking part

in a dying ritual and he didn't know
that one day people would be afraid

of this mall and the people who worked in this mall
and the people who lived near this mall.

The boy didn't know he was supposed to have better
choices for a favorite restaurant.

The boy doesn't even know he's a ghost;
he's still there nodding his head

when his mother asks him if he's enjoying their outing,
and that's the real reason I won't talk

about places like this. I don't want to disturb him.
There's no reason both of us have to lose this place.



When My Wife Gets to Tell You About White Sauce

She'll tell you everything
starts with the rivalry between

Whitt's and Big Bob Gibson.
She'll let you know that people who really know

white sauce know to order the turkey
and not the chicken. And she knows

how to tell who goes too heavy
on the mayonnaise and too light on the vinegar.

And these lessons don't matter because I love
white sauce because I actually hate white sauce,

but I love listening to my wife tell the world
how much she knows because after two strokes

there are times when she doesn't know the right way
to hold a knife or how to add

tax on a receipt. And every time I see her struggle I want
a minute in the octagon with whatever god

decided to crack her brain open twice.
But a minute boxing god is a minute I lose

of her talking someone through the right
amount of pepper or how much you can tell

just by watching the sauce drip from a fork.
And this is why we always need someone

like Prometheus stealing fire from heaven. Maybe
this is why someone needed to know it was possible

to look back on Sodom even if God turned the eyes
to salt first. Maybe we all need to know we can have something

the gods can't take away, even if it's just a memory
of what good barbecue sauce is supposed to taste like.

My Grandmother's Pound Cake Is as Close to Communion as I'll Ever Get

As long as I can taste it, a part of her lives in this world. A part of her rejects the dates given on the tombstone and obituary. Because a body is more than what fits in a grave. Every slice handed out during the holidays is another reminder of all the things she gave to us. You can't taste a hug until you can. You can't name the flavor of nostalgia until dessert takes you back to a shotgun house on the west side of Montgomery and reminds you that some part of you will never leave that shotgun house on the west side of Montgomery. You can't smell a false god until someone brings home a cake from the store and dares you to taste the difference. One day, the recipe will fall behind a counter and be forgotten, some great-great niece or nephew will see a pound cake and never find my grandmother's memory in the second swallow it takes to push a good bite down their throats. Then, maybe then, she'll be gone from this world just like any spirit or old god whose altar grows cold. But until then, she's still here, still feeding me with every crumb she left behind.

An Alabama native, Jason McCall teaches at the University of North Alabama. His books include Two-Face God, Dear Hero, and Mother, Less Child.

