

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

A barbecue communion

by Jake Adam York

SEVERAL YEARS AGO , a graduate-school classmate and I intersected in Birmingham. We'd become friends over the poetry of Keats and Yeats in upstate New York. Once a semester, we would trek to Syracuse's Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, where I'd load a rack of ribs into my toothpick-thin body, to the amazement of the Harley-riding regulars. So on his first trip to Birmingham, I decided to take Paul to Dreamland.

I mean the one near UAB. Paul wasn't ready for the Tuscaloosa cathedral. I had to ease him into it. And the Birmingham Dreamland was also part of my grad school experience: I went there with my parents just after it opened, when I made my first trip home from New York for Thanksgiving. Birmingham's Dreamland was one of the few places I could exceed my Dinosaur draw, polishing off a rack before moving on to the second. This was the obvious venue for an Alabama reunion with Paul.

What barbecue you eat provides an image of your tongue, of your taste, and thereby of your general discernment—even your tolerance. Where you eat says a lot about you, too. My tongue has always preferred the tangy, the hot, and the salty to the sweet, and I like a little char on my meat. This was Dreamland at its best.

BY THE TIME Paul and I slide into a booth, I've begun to write poems that explore the legacies of the Civil Rights Movement. I've spent a lot of time in Birmingham revisiting the 16th Street Baptist Church, Kelly Ingram Park, and the Gaston Motel, tracing the paths of Dynamite Bob Chambliss and Bobby Frank Cherry. The city is a palimpsest: Tilt your head and you see the past beneath the present. Everywhere I go, I know where I am in relation to the city's historical landmarks. I sit, Kelly Ingram over my right shoulder, thirty blocks away, Vulcan high over my left.

As we talk, I spot again one of the more intriguing pieces of Alabama ephemera that cover the walls, a sign that says STAND UP FOR ALABAMA —a relic from one of George Wallace's gubernatorial campaigns.

It wasn't easy being from Alabama—being white and from Alabama—in graduate school in upstate New York. I was always being asked to explain some Southern psychopathy, to parse the motives of the 16th Street Church bombers, as if being from the same place and

of the same race as the killers meant that I had some special insight, maybe even that I was in league with them. I wanted, so many times, to hold a simple point of pride in my home. I wanted to feel something other than shame. Maybe that's what George Wallace wanted, too.

But I can't read that slogan and not think of Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door, the very image of segregation. That history—the bombs and fire hoses and dogs, the resistance or the indifference to integration—casts its shadow over everything. So much separation. Belligerence, not pride. A fear, a separateness that hangs like smoke in the air.

A WAITER CATCHES MY EYE , and as he approaches, I think that if that fight against integration is a persistent part of our history, so, too, is the fight for integration. So, too, is the resistance to the old order, the desire to come together, which you can see here, where faces of almost every color congregate each day.



Until now, it was impossible to impart this scene to Paul, even as we PhD-seekers mingled with the motorcycle leather beneath the I-90 overpass in Syracuse. One of the core academic assumptions of the mid-'90s was that Birmingham's history would always keep us, white and black, apart.

The waiter greets me with a smile. I return the word. He turns to look Paul over, then asks him, "You ready to eat some ribs, little man?"

Paul's thin. And, as we say, he's not from around here. Somehow the waiter sees that. Maybe it's in our body language: I'm already relaxed by the scent of the smoke. Paul's still looking for the menu, something to hold in his hands, while I imagine everyone else can recite the sign over the bar: RIBS, RIB SANDWICH, WHITE BREAD, SWEET TEA—NO POTATO SALAD, NO COLESLAW, DON'T ASK.


Maybe the waiter can hear it—Birmingham, barbecue—in my voice. As academics, Paul and I are brothers in arms. But the waiter and I, in this moment he offers me, are barbecue brothers. We speak the same language. Whatever our history tells us, however much it may remind of us our separations, our language—our tongues—bring us together.

Maybe it's only for a moment, a meal. But a meal is a promise, as it is a blessing. This is where we gather. This is where we all go to church. 🍷

Jake Adam York is the author, most recently, of the poetry collection *Persons Unknown*.

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Pitmasters, Places, Smoke, and Sauce**
15th annual Southern Foodways Symposium
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