

VERSE



When It's Your First Time

BY JASON McCALL

Ordering at the local restaurant, you want to act
like it isn't the first time. Maybe you did get lucky

enough to learn a tip from your cool cousins,
maybe you remember a move

you saw on the internet. You should focus
now, but your mind can't do anything

but drift to the paradox of experience:
how can someone get some

experience when the world has no time
for beginners? You can feel the patience draining

from the person who's waiting to serve you,
and you panic and blink before you remember

that you've practiced this by yourself
a few times. But you never wanted this to feel

like a routine. Something this good should feel
natural. But now you've forgotten everything

about what feels natural and what doesn't. Your eyes
are moving fast and your mouth is moving slow

and you can't decide what to do
with your hands and you can swear you heard a breath

behind you whisper a curse so you chicken out
and order chicken fingers and walk out

with your head down and your head wondering
when a chance that good will come by again.



For All the Hands I've Had to Grab Before I Could Grab a Plate

BY JASON McCALL

There are the nieces and cousins happy
to be included in the circle to show they can
hold hands and hold their eyes shut during the prayer
like the big kids they're watching from the corner
of their squinted eyes.

There are the teenage boys who never know how
to hold a hand without squeezing or pulling
away at the first syllable of "amen."

There are the grandparents and aunts and uncles whose
hands carry my family history of failures and
factories and fieldwork and footholds all cashed
in to buy us a seat at the table, to buy the table, to buy
the food on the table, to buy the gas and tickets and hotels
it took to make sure we were all at the table.

There are hands that you'll swear
are bigger every year. Hands you'll swear aren't
getting smaller every year.

Hands that talk
and tell you "I love you," "I missed you," "I know
you didn't mean it," "I know you meant it, but
you can't stop me from loving you" just
by the way they tap the back of your hand before
locking your fingers in place.

Hands that feel like a door
closing and leaving the weight of a wet winter in the yard.
Hands that feel like a door
opening and setting you free into the first bite of spring.



When She Says Dick Howell's Barbecue Tastes Like Home

BY JASON McCALL

You can hear from the inside of her
sigh that she gives at the end
that she's not really talking

about the smoke or how close they got
to making white sauce the right
and proper way. It's not about her being spoiled

by the flavor of North Alabama pits. When she talks, I smile
because for so long home has meant nothing
but Lysol and the lists of the dead

waiting to be freed from refrigerated trucks.
Home was the silent pauses on one end
of a video screen and the restless trumpets

of the breaking news banners. Home was an army
of doors we couldn't cross because of our parents
getting older and because we couldn't trust doctors

with her heart or my skin. And home is a hangman
that's always been waiting to take our necks,
but there's a museum in Montgomery with the names

of victims claimed by another pandemic that can sing
that song better than I ever will. Home was a light eaten
by the darkness of a passing day and eaten again and again

like the eagle taking Prometheus' liver, and that's a reminder
of monotony being its own judgment from heaven.
Home was a lesson about the Danaids, about myths and truths. And my wife

and her words were a reminder that sometimes home is smoke
and tenderness reminding us all to savor, chew, and breathe
in the only home we'll be lucky enough to know.



To the Family Who Brought Kraft Barbecue Sauce into Archibald and Woodrow's

BY JASON McCALL

This was supposed to be a poem about foolishness.
About knowing when to let perfect be

perfect, about leaving well enough and better
than well enough alone. This was going to be about Instagram

filters on *Mona Lisa* and that time the Final Four
used Jennifer Hudson's cover of "One Shining Moment."

This was going to be about Superman straightening
the Leaning Tower of Pisa, about Jordan coming back

to play for the Wizards, about Custer walking into Little Bighorn
without his biggest guns. But that's the easy answer

when we see something we can't believe to be true.
And it's easy to say the shock I shared with my friends

that Sunday was about you, but maybe it was about me.
Maybe I was shocked just like the Roman governors

who wrote back to the capital begging for guidance
on what to do with these weird fanatics that would rather be fed

to lions than play along with polytheism.
Maybe I was just like the dumb faces in the crowd

watching Meredith or Malone walk across campus
and change the world. Maybe I walked out hiding

a laugh because, sometimes, we laugh when we're nervous,
and maybe the hardest thing for me to understand wasn't the choice

of sauce, but the choice of choice. This really isn't a poem
about foolishness or purity or taste. This is a poem about wonder

and wondering what it's like to own something enough
to dress it and swallow it any way

you wish when you know the world
might be watching. Buying a plate of barbecue

and owning a plate of barbecue are two very different things,
and I thank you for that lesson.

Jason McCall is the author of one essay collection and half a dozen collections of poetry. An Alabama native with an MFA from the University of Miami, he spends his days teaching at the University of North Alabama and his nights praying for the day that Florence (AL) gives him a restaurant that serves gyros and fries.