

Mandee Marie Driggers

Budding

He waddled into the room wearing blueberry pie down the front of his shirt. “Oh would you look at this boy!” cheered his mother. He smiled in response. “Oh how could I be mad at you? Would you look at this boy? He must have been hungry,” his mother said. There's no punishment for this boy, his mother's son, sweet-toothed, white teeth, behind deep blue disguise.

This boy licked the honey dripping from his fingers. They were still powdered with the dry dust of a morning spent forming mud pies in his Grandmother's flowerbed. His mother made biscuits with buttermilk and though she liked them best with a little black on the bottom she knew to keep the oven low so they would still rise to the lip of the pan. This boy, her son, loved them warm, caked in cold, hard, butter. Butter that eventually seeped over the edges and into the chips in the plate when warmed.

“Do you want to play a game?” asked his mother.

He nodded.

“Okay then. Patty-cake, patty-cake,” she formed the thick paste from the bowl into flattened lumps, plying them from her hands with a thin layer of flour, all in cadence with her tune. “Baker's man. Bake me a cake as fast as you can.” She set the first biscuit into the pan, greased with lard. “Would you believe this boy? He's a mess.” She smiled,

gesturing to the puffs of dirt he had carried inside with him from the yard. “Go wash your hands so you can help me.”

The boy did not receive money for chores, only for being born, which meant one single Jefferson. “Do they even take two-dollars anywhere?” this boy asked his mother.

“Just like two one-dollars,” she said. Her cigarette ashed itself into the remnants of meatloaf on her plate. The tray was a pale yellow, cut into tiny sections like the kind they served free lunch on at school.

“Can I have that?” he asked his mother, pointing at the sugar-free-pudding still topped with the shiny foil.

“You sure can birthday-boy. I’m not too hungry.”

“You should quit smoking mama.” Said this boy, pulling off the foil and licking it clean.

“I know baby. There’s a lot of things I should of done.”

When his mother was moved to the hospital, they sent this boy down the road to his uncle’s home. In this new neighborhood there weren’t many houses but there were parks and so came the possibilities of friendship. He sat first on the bench by the swing set, ready to catch the eye of any kid his age that might want to play. When the sun had started to blind him he set-up under the shade.

Maybe they were all too young or maybe he just wasn’t friendly but when the sounds of an ice-cream truck came barreling through, he sensed this might be his only opportunity.

“What can I get you?” asked the pepperoni face in the window of the ice-cream truck.

“Do you have any push-ups?” asked this boy.

“No. Just what’s on the sign.”

The sounds of popsicles, icy morsels, and 64 options should have been the soundtrack to summer.

“I’ll take a raspberry popsicle please.”

“Sorry, all out.”

“Orange?”

“You got it.”

“Thank you,” said this boy.

“Next.”

He sat back down in the shade, joined by another boy.

“You can have half of mine,” said the stranger. He pulled apart the two sticks, handing him the slowly melting blue-red of his raspberry treat.

“Okay. Let’s trade.” he said, swapping out half of the sour orange for a taste of the familiar.

This boy, his mother, was dead. She was no longer with us, had passed, moved on, was lost.

“Give us this day, our daily bread,” mumbled this boy from the front pew of the church. His mother's coffin was closed. The body of Christ perished from the fingerprint of his tongue.

They didn’t have a wake, just a few folks dropping off macaroni casseroles and sweet-potato pies in-between half-hour sitcoms and on-the-hour news shows. Dinner was loosened neckties and paper plates gone soggy in the microwave.

“Do you want a biscuit?” asked his uncle's date.

“No, thank you,” said this boy.

“I made them,” she said.

“My plate's full.”

“Just try it,” said his uncle.

“No, thank you.”

“Just take your fucking no-thank-you bites, kid.”

“No,” said this boy, “No, thank you.”

“It's fine hun,” she said to his uncle. “Anybody thirsty?”

“Water, please.” said this boy.

“I'll take another beer,” said his uncle.

“Another?” she asked.

“Yes. Another.”

“Do you want a glass?”

“No, thank you,” said his uncle.

Before his cousin's left to push buttons, firing missiles, shooting from ships, Desert Storm; when Cobain wore dresses, shot dope, just dope; when the president spoke, on TV, only in predestined moments, subject shot: torso-up, subject: torso-up.

Up she rose from between his knees, her brunette hair framing a face that was just two years his senior. She didn't kiss this boy just yet so he smoked one more for the nicotine colored coffee cup until she returned to him, still in his shirt.

“I need to go,” she told him.

“Do you?” he replied, knowing she would before the words left his mouth.

“I’ll phone,” she whispered, her tights up to her knees before he could even suggest she come to dinner.

She tried to kiss him now, with too much mint in her kiss for him, this boy. He turned his lips to her cheek, this boy, still consumed with menthol or the thought of sleep, post-coming, like too much turkey before the Steelers kicked off. This boy, still hungry for love that dug its heels in.