

Catholic School

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Michelle R. Smith

CATHOLIC SCHOOL

I went to Catholic school/ brown & gold skirts/ Our Fathers/
and fat nuns waddling like zoo penguins/ I wanted ashes on
my forehead and sips of altar wine/ I was told I couldn't have
them/ but I had to attend mass anyway/ and the white-haired
priests mumbled Latin prayers to us/ antsy black kids/ whose
parents wanted us to have decent books/ a place to learn that
wasn't in ruin/ whose parents would have stopped payment/
had they known/ we were learning to tolerate exclusion/ in
silence

I wanted to be confirmed/ I wanted to wear the white dress/
fluffy as buttercreme frosting/ and be a beautiful daughter of
Christ/ I wanted to rub the coral rosary with the pad of my
thumb until I felt calm/ I wanted porcelain Jesus to kiss me
with his lipstick red lips/ I wanted to be saved from being
brown/ being female/ and being pushed to the ground at
recess/ I knew these things were connected/ I just didn't
understand how

Mary/ Mary/ can you hear me/ Mary/ tell Jesus that I need
him now/ tell Jesus that the nuns have stone faces that strike
hard/ tell Jesus that they don't act like my sisters/ Mary/
Mary/ can you hear me/ Mary/ tell Jesus that I need to see
him to believe him/ tell Jesus that I don't like stiff plaid and
rubber-soled shoes/ they make me feel trapped/ tell Jesus I
want to wear red and still be holy

I sat in that cathedral every Friday/ kicking the back of the
pew/ waiting to be beamed up/ Star Trek style/ to heaven/
where black girls can have their names caressed by their
teacher's tongue/ and you don't have to beg on your knees/
any longer/ to be heard/ waiting/ I sat there/ waiting/ singing
the songs/ chanting the prayers/ believing

And the only thing that came/ was the snuffing of the candles/
the sudden silence of the organ/ the recessional of the priest/
the glare of the sun into the sanctuary/ the realization that
prayers are not answered/ unless spoken by white tongues in
dead languages/ the death of my belief in porcelain Jesus/ and
the healing power of his bright red kiss