

Meltdown

BY ROB COOK

Lick by lick,
slurp by slurp,
the bubble gum ice cream is turning into a four-year-old boy
enraptured with sweetness on tongue, coldness on lips,
exuberant messiness melting on face and fingers, shirt and shoes.
No religious rapture could be more transcendent than this Sacrament of the Cone,
bestowing its blessings on the boy at an age when feelings are fresh and unfiltered,
when moods careen carelessly from moment to moment.
He is beaming with joy, humming with joy, hopping with joy.
The world is brighter, sunnier, happier —

until he hears his mother yelling,
“No no no no no! Look at you, you’re a mess!”
She feels ashamed at her outburst,
but also a kind of — well, let’s call it what it is —
a kind of pleasure, a pressure release,
the Furies breaking loose after hours
of patience, generosity, kindness,
of getting shoes on his recalcitrant feet
of cutting his sandwich into the shape of a dinosaur so he’ll eat it
of cleaning it off the floor because it had horns instead of spikes
and now he needs a bath
and then it’s shoes again
and now it’s two hours later
and then the battle to get him in the car seat
all in order to go to the zoo
and she doesn’t even like zoos
and it’s just one more part of one more day
in the relentless stream of days
in exile from the adult world
marooned in the Land of Sticky Hands,
starved for intellectual discourse but
trapped in the mind-numbing world of Pokémon trivia
all of it unappreciated by anyone
and certainly not by this needy little bundle of joy.

She grabs his face, stares him in the eye. “You don’t deserve ice cream!”
He starts to cry. She snatches the cone and tosses
the whole drippy gooey mess in a trash can.
She scrubs him roughly with a cloth and spit
as if he were a shoe in need of shining.
His cries become howls. He kicks her.
“Stop it!” she screams as her hand rises to smack him.

She stops, stunned, scared. *He’s just a little boy.*
He turns to his mommy for comfort. Where else can he go?
She rocks him in her arms and strokes his hair,
gently wipes off his nose then
dries his tears and her own.

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