

Build a Bigger Table

Who have you become,

that a little girl
holding a discounted birthday cake
can offend you more
than the hunger
that carried her to it?

She stands in line,
turning the clear plastic container
beneath fluorescent lights,
watching blue icing roses
catch the glitter glow
as though they belong
behind glass at the Clay Center.

The bakery clerk
pressed one yellow sticker
over another until the old cake
waited in line at the food pantry.

She looks up at her Mamaw.

“Do you think you can freeze some
for Bubby’s birthday?”

That question follows me home.

Because somewhere
between the wheat field
and the dinner table,
we decided
survival is good enough.

Bread is acceptable.

But frosting is extravagant.

That poor people should inherit nutrition,

celebration belongs
to someone else.

We have grown suspicious
of happiness
in the hands of poverty.

A congressman boasts
about lobster tails,
thick ribeyes, the ease
of tomorrow's dinner,

then shrugs
that perhaps
those living paycheck to paycheck

simply don't work as hard.

I wonder if he has ever watched
a nursing assistant smile and
lift another human being
before sunrise,

or the woman standing ten hours
behind the cash register,

knees swollen, smile practiced,
counting someone else's groceries

before returning home
to count her own dollars for rent
she can't afford.

Funny,

how the people whose bodies
hold us together
are forever asked to prove
they deserve birthday cake,
or a bottle of Sprite,

while fortunes large enough
to feed whole counties

are never required to explain
their appetite.

Listen.

I hear children ask,

“Is this too expensive?”

before they ever learn
the names of stars.

No child should know
the price of joy before they know
the shape of the Big Dipper.

Every table I ever owned
began as a tree.

Trees have never confused the
generosity of shade
for weakness.

Neither did my Mamaw.

She survived
a war
where bread disappeared,
where hunger was measured
not in hours, but heat-less winters.

She understood
food was never only food.

Soup carried stories.

Fresh biscuits could settle
an argument before words
ever found the room.

A boxed cake cooling
on top of the stove
told every child
who crossed her porch,

I hoped

you might come.

When strangers arrived,
she never counted chairs.

Papaw
simply disappeared
into the barn,
returned
with another board,
balanced it
across two sawhorses,

and somehow
the room
grew larger.

I have spent years
trying to understand
that miracle.

It wasn't
that the table
expanded.

It was
that no one believed
its edges were sacred.

Friends, we inspect grocery carts.
We debate whether children and the working poor
have earned dessert,
whether delight fits inside
a government budget,

whether poor families
should celebrate
at all.

As though sugar
were a moral failure.

In a few days
we'll sit outside together

watching fireworks,
sliced tomatoes
smelling like July,
children licking red and blue icing
from their thumbs,
reaching for another can
of Coca-Cola,
without anyone
counting the cost.

Because I no longer believe
food is charity.

I believe it is the root of our language.

The first sentence our species
ever spoke to one another.

Stay.

Eat.

You belong here.

I will care for you.

The measure of your soul
has never been
how many lobster tails
fit upon the richest plate,
but whether the smallest child
holding a discounted cake
can walk home believing

the celebration

was meant for her, too.

Jenny Keener, Pokeberry Psalms

