

KURTIS LAMKIN

The Miseriatus

It was snowing and I was still sitting on the dumb side of class
just cause I walked out of school
That happened way back at the beginning of September
and I'm still on the wall watching the math go by

They had a rule that if a button popped off your coat you got
punished by the Mother Superior
I walked in class one day from recess and she said
"Where's that button, boy?"

I looked down, my coat was wide open, like I had a hole
in my chest
She said "bend over that desk, I'm going to get my paddle
just for you"

All the kids said:
"ooooooooo ooooooooo . . ."

But a novice took me by my hand and told the Mother
she knew exactly where the button was
She led me out into the schoolyard, and we searched
for that button

We looked in the footprints in the snow
We looked in the snow-angels and the scuffs we made
when we walked through the snow
cold

and we ran so hard from snowball fights that the sweat
made steam rising from the top of our nappy heads

She was in her black habit, I was in my blue uniform as we
walked through the snow falling quietly divine

She found the button and sewed it on my coat, sent me
back with the rest of the kids
The Mother Superior looked at me
but she put her paddle down

That afternoon I went down to the church and I asked the priest
if I could become an altar boy. He said no.
I was too young, six years old, and I had to read Latin
to recite the prayers

I beg and I beg and I beg and I beg and I beg and I beg
cause if I could be an altar boy, I could be a priest
and if I could be a priest, I could marry that nun
and if I could marry that nun, well, *o happy day* . . .

So I beg and I beg
Finally he gave me a prayer book and said if I come back
Monday knowing it . . .
then, well, we'll see what happens

I took the book home to my older brothers and they read it to me
I recited word for word
I chanted Latin over my Cocoa Puffs; and when it was time to go
to bed, in the dark, under the covers —

in nomine pater et filius et spiritus sanctus

On Monday I'm back in the cathedral — eighth grade altar boys
and seventh graders marching. The priest told me to do
The Miseriatus. I climbed the steps that led to the altar
I looked at all the saints in the ceiling

I raised my voice as tall as I could:
*Miseriatus tui omnipotent Deus et dimissus peccatus tui
 perducatur Deum ad vitam ad terram. Amen*
 I don't know what that meant to that priest but to me it meant this:

*I love you more now.
 The little things have suddenly grown grand.
 They tried to beat the brightness into me, but you
 took me by my hand and led me past the whipping*

*I wanted to shine for you
 I wanted to speak your name
 I wanted you to save me more than I wanted to be saved
 Amen*

I became the first first grade altar boy
 I did the weddings, the funerals and the christenings
 I made more money in tips that year than I made
 for all the days of my life

I got so good that priest came by our house the day
 before we went down south for the summer
 He tossed my mother could she leave me in the city
 so I could do the masses during the month of July

She said: "What you wanna do boy?"
 I thought about running through the fields with my cousins
 and playing catch on the road with my Uncle Sam
 and walking through the cane field with great grand-daddy

he cut me chunk and let me chew it
 the juice cool and sweet in my body. Yeh, I went down south
 for the summer, but I was aiming myself toward September
 cause the woman who saved my natural hide was gonna be my second grade teacher

I came back to school dressed sharp, down:
I had creases in my trousers, I had starch in my collars
I had so much grease in my hair I had waves rippling across the top
of my dome

But there was a stranger at the blackboard
I said: Where's sister? They said: "She's gone."
When she comin back? They said, "Never."
nevernevernevernevernevernevernever . . .

I walked over to my desk.
I crossed my arms on the table top.
I laid my head in my arms.
I stayed that way for several years.

That's why I'm talking to the boys on the wall who said "oooo"
when I walked out in the cold with a woman and my chest wide open.

It's gonna happen to you
somebody's gonna treat you kind

You're gonna wanna shine for them
You're gonna start speaking in tongues
You're gonna want them to win forever
I would do it all over again — even if she bust my heart

even if she bust my heart: Amen