

James Valvis

Banana Split Summer

When the ice cream truck came, when its music swept through the streets like sirens singing, you ran up the stairs to tell your father, and had he not wanted any ice cream, nothing would have made him give you money so you could buy a vanilla cone with sprinkles, but he did want something, his banana split, and so he gave you a new five dollar bill, just enough for a banana split and a cone. It was your job then to run back downstairs, stand in line, purchase the banana split boat, and carry the ice cream up the long stairs. Since you couldn't carry both at once, your vanilla cone had to wait. There was no rushing, the fear too great you'd mix the strawberry and fudge in his split into one obscene ice cream mush. Walking that long stairwell, slowly, slowly, knowing behind you the line of customers shrunk, the people grabbing their cones and pineapple sundaes, you tried to keep your pace fast but steady. You could already taste your ice cream, tongue pushing sprinkles into the white cream. Late August, this was the last ice cream this summer. First, however, you had to deliver the banana split still split, and then run back outside before the truck drove off, before the siren song came on again and drifted away like you felt summer drifting, tooling down the block, toward others, the new lucky. Near the top of the stairs, still imagining the cool cream,

you felt a jolt when up rode the music, that jingle,
that treasonous song now sung for another.
What else could have happened then but the panic,
the tripping over your own feet, the sensation of falling?
With both hands holding tight the banana split,
there was nothing to break your fall.
Yes, it was better to crush your nose than spill his treat,
yet it slipped from your hands anyway,
just slid right out of your grip, that whole summer
split open and everything spilt everywhere forever.

Mudding

My brother took me mudding,
and this is how I ended up
in the a pickup truck stuck
in the middle of a lake
with two people I didn't know,
the bearded and overweight driver
and, seated between us, a kid
who was maybe eight or nine.
The water line was almost up
to our the door window
and the driver tried to restart the car
but it wouldn't even turn over.
He called on the cell phone
to send in the tow truck and hook
to drag us out of there,
and this is when the kid lost it,
said we were all going to die in there,
and began thrashing about.
We weren't going to die.
The water was maybe chest high
and I am a good swimmer besides.
I told the kid everything would be okay
and he cried and told me to fuck off.
I was a nigger lover, he said, so shut up,
and the bearded guy laughed
as water flooded around our feet.
I wasn't even sure how black people
came up for discussion because
there weren't any around
and I hadn't met the kid before,

though technically he was right.
I'm fond of black people, as a rule,
who, also as a rule, wouldn't be stupid
enough to intentionally drive a pickup
into a swampy Florida lake.
When the water rose in the cab,
reaching almost up to my calves,
screw it, I looked that kid in the eye
and said, "We're all going to die."
The way he started crying then,
tears running through his muddy face,
I was sad when we were rescued.