

JAMES EARL JONES EATS WHOOPIE PIE

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In winter, we beat the cream in steel bowls, and our wrists are hurting, and we call out in voices too high-pitched to be called masculine. We think little about our state, about its geographical tumorness, about our father's hands, the old net-scars there, trying, and failing, to wedge the whisks from our own.

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To the football game on TV, dad screams *Fuck a duck!* while mom, in the kitchen, tells you why brown sugar is brown. When she calls molasses *viscous*, you will think she's mispronouncing *vicious*. Her hands are shaking, but she never drops the whisk.

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In 1984, your third-cousin, your dad tells you, tries to hang himself with a length of cassette tape — *The Empire Strikes Back*. Dad uses words, like *pussy*. You begin wondering about the feel of the tape — the crackly smoothness of it. You begin wondering about magnetism and particles, and you read somewhere that ferric oxide is inorganic, and chemists consider it an ill-defined material. The throat, in contrast, is very well-defined. You touch your Adam's apple with two fingers and swallow — this beautiful up-and-down.

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In the whisking, is both the whisking away, and the whisking toward. How the air makes the cream solid. How the air, this cold, sweetens the chest.

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The secret is in the air, and therefore, invisible, and infuriating.

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Here, we work hard to make the liquid of things go away, apply strength and heat, coagulant and the kind of voice called *bedside manner*.

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In 1984, three teenage boys threw Charles O. Howard over the State Street Bridge in Bangor. Howard drowned in the Kenduskeag Stream as the boys, from above, hurled homophobic slurs, attacking, among other things, the pitch of Howard's voice.

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When we're ill, the most comforting vocal pitch to the ear is bass. When we're well, as when we're drowning, the jury's still out.

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In many Maine hospitals, Whoopie Pie, the official State Treat, is "liquefied" and chilled, and given to patients who've just had their tonsils removed. It is coagulant, sealant, replacement for both the standard ice cream, and the cut-away parts of us.

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In the Whoopie Pie is every Amish woman's broken leg, tendonitis, farmhouse mastectomy, the slowness of the horses. The slowness of horses to hospital. Is the chocolate cake buns your mother, or mine, describes as bosomy, the oven cracking their tops. In Maine, we know: it's the heat that fissures us. It's the cool of the cream in the middle that holds our parts together, keeps our insides, inside.

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Dad feels that the eel is a masculine animal, for obvious reasons. For less obvious ones, he calls the Whoopie Pie *bitch food*.

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Dad knows: rivers meander. He does not think of metaphor when he talks of weirs, the barriers he used to install in order to alter the river's flow, hinder the passage of the fish.

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I went fishing only once with Dad. He was not happy that I was afraid of the rainbow trout.

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In this kind of winter, we stay inside as much as we can. The ocean's there, close now. But with all of this ice, we never think of it as roiling.

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Your father, or my father, hides Bowie knives in his underwear drawer. Your mother, or mine, thinks differently of knives now, thinks of the things we must cut from ourselves in order to live. Here, in excision, is the extension of a life. Here, we fill in the blanks with sweetened cream. No one whisks it to soft peaks faster than your mother, or my mother. She whisks. Nothing of her body shakes.

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In 1717, the Great Snow decimated Maine. Horses froze and livestock froze and our vocal chords constricted and we all tipped more toward soprano. In cold, and in high-pitched voices, panic. We kept warm, and alive, by whipping. It wasn't until years later that we associated whipping with cream, 25-foot snowdrifts with dessert.

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In winter, we write our names on the windowpanes with our tongues. We name the sweetest, softest stuff after ice.

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Your father, or my father, likes masculine names, single-syllable names. Masculine voices. In bass, he says, is power. In the eel, is power. No other animal, he says, maximizes its muscle output more. Mom takes a cookie sheet of chocolate buns from the oven. Your father, or my father, says . . . *a good strong name*. You don't tell him — just like I don't tell him — that telemarketers often confuse you for the Lady of the House.

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Other names for Whoopie Pie: Gob, Black Moon, Big Fat Oreo, Big Fucking Oreo, Bob.

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A whirring sound: you can't tell if that's the snow, the electric mixer,

the football audience complaining on the television. You can't tell if the pitch of your voice is the smallest of something, the largest of another.

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In 1717, a record number of pirates raided vessels along the Maine coastline. The popular pirate boat of the time was a two-masted ship called *a snow*.

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The world's largest Whoopie Pie was slapped together in South Portland in March 2011. The ground was still soggy. The pie weighed 1,062 pounds, and was sold by the slice, and the proceeds went to the mailing of smaller Whoopie Pies to Maine soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Your mother, or mine, says something about philanthropy and treats. Your father says, *It's all a big fucking something*.

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When Maine's blueberry farmers and potato farmers and sweet corn farmers and dairy farmers found that their wives had, in their lunch pails, wrapped in linen a small chocolate cookie sandwich with a sweet cream filling, they reportedly shouted, *Whoopie!* That they were eating cake batter leftovers did not deter their excitement. That my father, or yours, considers such an exclamation less-than-masculine did not slow their eating, compel them to wipe the cream from their chins. My father, or yours, is conflicted about farmers.

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In 2011, Maine legislators launched Proposition L.D. 71, "The Act to Designate Whoopie Pie as the State Dessert." The Pennsylvania Dutch, and the New Hampshire German, tried to intervene, claiming that the dessert belonged to them. Regardless, the proposition received full bipartisan support, and your father, or mine, asked what the fuck this had to do with the dropping lobster prices, and your mother, or mine, began whisking not only for her body, but for the state.

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My father says that James Earl Jones is the most masculine man he

can think of. It's his deep voice, he says. I don't tell him what I've read: that it takes greater vocal strength for a soprano to sing alto than it does for a bass to sing baritone. It's harder to go lower. On the telephone, when he's around, I try to sound more like a man.

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The bottom bun of the Whoopie Pie is the same as the top, except wetter.

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The breastbone of the dove is relatively stronger than that of the elephant.

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It's cold outside. I thumb through the atlas. I think of names written in snow, names drowning in thick streams. I think of how my father says he's beaten many people up, sure, but he's never thought to drown anyone. Of how Bangor means *monastic enclosure*, or *the sharp upper rods of a wattle fence*, or *horned*. Of how Whoopie means *sex*. Of how our entire state resembles a growth that demands excision.

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My mother talks of ghost itches, and whisks. My father has stopped talking. I've started doing push-ups.

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James Earl Jones says, "My stutter was so bad, I barely spoke to anyone for eight years." MaryAnne says, "We use gelatin in our cream." My mother says nothing to her of cheating, of shortcuts, of Darth Vader as thin salve, of sugar as the sweetest thing that will kill us.

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Nothing of: The stuff inside of us, whipped. Perfectly mixed. One thing dissolved into another, our wrists making it happen. Contradiction is: my feminine voice, and the strength of the muscles required to produce it.

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In the pasturage outside of Bangor, the hoofless horse notices no flies, makes no sound. That doesn't mean that neither is there, and ready to bite.

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Is my voice the voice of my body? Is a one-thousand-pound cookie sandwich the voice of the new war bond? My mother looks at a picture of herself young and her voice does something I don't like.

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Contradiction is.

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So, we eat two Whoopie Pies. One for comfort, one for the identity of our state. These two reasons are not the same, will never be the same.

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We are one out of fifty, and we are the extremity. We temper extremity by moving toward the cream in the middle. We need to do this so desperately, we legislate it.

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My father, and yours, sleeps on the couch. Our mothers are making Whoopie Pie to bring to the neighbors'. They know, but won't admit, that hers is the best. They know that, after she got sick, her Whoopie Pies got better. Like the cassette tape, this is also ill-defined material.

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We are swagger and insecurity. We wonder which is the cream, which the sugar.

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... of how Kenduskeag means *Eel-weir place*.

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We are body and voice, pectorals and castrato, the Force and the

Dark Side, we are the horse in the mild winter, our names frozen
on windows. We look through our names and see the horses shiver.
We are Ladies of the House. We are Bob. We are father and son.

