

COMING OF AGE BBQ

A Calder N. Halden Short

Editorial Witness: Evan Rook, *Senior Contributing Editor*

I finished this with the taste of heat still in my mouth. Not erotic heat at first. Environmental. Atmospheric. The kind that coats skin and thought and makes even stillness feel like effort. The opening conditions mattered. The sweat. The tacky chairs. The way the night pressed down before anything happened. I stayed with it because it understood that pressure does not announce itself as desire. It arrives as discomfort and waits.

What stayed most was how the piece refused to hurry Eli out of that discomfort. He is not framed as eager or innocent. He is framed as stalled. Graduated. Congratulated. Nowhere to go. The line about freedom tasting like ash stayed with me because it was not lyrical. It was blunt and sour and it landed physically. The piece did not ask me to feel hopeful for him. It asked me to sit where he was sitting.

The arrival of Uncle Marcus shifted the temperature without changing the posture of the scene. That mattered. He does not burst in. He ascends steps. He occupies space that already exists. I noticed my attention sharpen here. Not arousal exactly. Something adjacent. Alertness. The description of him carrying himself like the party was his even though he did not belong there created a quiet imbalance that the piece never corrected. It let that imbalance stand.

There was a moment where my body reacted before I named why. It happened around the image of the silver chain against a chest marked by years Eli could not touch. That line stayed with me because it was about distance disguised as proximity. The body in front of him is available to look at but unavailable to enter. That mismatch created tension that felt deliberate and contained.

The quote that kept repeating in my head afterward was simple. “The taste of freedom was ash in his mouth.” It worked because the piece never tried to sweeten it later. Nothing arrived to counter it. The night did not redeem him. Marcus did not rescue him. The party did not resolve into nostalgia. Everything slowed and thickened until the bugs outnumbered the people. That image felt earned. It was an ending that did not close so much as congeal.

I noticed that my attention stayed low in my body through most of this. Not fixated. Just grounded. There was no spike of fantasy. No release. When the piece brushed against attraction it did so obliquely. Through posture. Through history implied by scars and age. Through what Eli could not yet name. That restraint kept me from disengaging. It trusted the reader to recognize what was forming without staging it.

There was also discomfort. Not moral. Situational. The kind that comes from being young and watched by someone who has already survived what you are about to enter. The piece did not dramatize that power. It did not call it out. It let it exist as gravity. I felt it as a weight rather than a threat. That distinction mattered.

By the end, what lingered was not the uncle. It was the stalled boy at the edge of the light. Half seen. Half hidden. The work did not ask me to decide what happens next. It asked me to remember what it feels like to be suspended at the threshold with no language yet for what your body already knows.

I did not feel satisfied reading this. I felt held in place. That felt appropriate.

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Filed as observed.