



THE RAM'S TALE

2013

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*Every day one should at least hear one little song,
read one good poem, see one fine painting and
— if at all possible — speak a few sensible words.*

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Poetry

Well, write poetry, for God's sake, it's the only thing that matters.
— E. E. Cummings

Signal Fire

Amanda Valdez

First Place

In midday I watched the children play
outside my classroom window
on the west side of town.

I thought how bright the paper is inside
with blues and limes and how proud
the colors stand within its skin—
a pioneer for the small and tender.

With the last of the spiders wiped
with pencil textiles I could hear
tiny howls, a gathering of five boys
throwing around a football,
invisible behind thumb-greased glass.

Surely children's beady-eyes, bright with hopes
for gutted knees and grass-filled mouths
are a life lesson of their own.

But, outside is a war and I am watching
against a patchy globe rondure, the blur
of a boy beaten down around the ball;
the white lace blazing,
a sunlit fire pit of loss.

It was like watching nerves of growth
as moving ocean current; the ripples carrying
them along onto island sand.
The red-shirted boy holding onto himself,
clenching for breath while the others like flies
surrounding the pig, hovering over meat
raw and stiff.

Trichotillomania

Amanda Valdez

Must I admit: that
being with you was like
pulling out a single
strand of hair, daily.
Look—
this fleshy white
button ferally crowning
To begin: with the scraping
of my own scalp off
lining brainwashed
finger nails as a reminder
to my heart still beating
upon this earth
so that you may take
the bottom piece to split
my split ends in half
leaving broken off
eyelashes underneath
the talons. Were they your
keepsake to search a shine
when combing foreign
locks? Your reminder
in the strangeness of
other bloodstained
women?

Hypomnesia

Amanda Valdez

I know when it is winter.

When the books begin to show
their thinner side of verity

and the pages not the color butter,
but a rusted wheel blend;
words wheedling away
from memory as the crisp night settles
into bed. Too dark to retain our
archives; too withdrawn

from this warm tragedy tale
turned from mine.

(dance of death)

Danielle Taylor

Second Place

our sky was enormously pregnant with moon-
almost here, the fat ghost color choked
the south end corners of the enlarged
earth, who was all mute to the luminous
collision shadowing tyranny above us,
she was all blind, in love with herself

no mouths fall open we sink with love
as moons to our selves and don't see the dark
face and backside dust seas that will collide
with the ghost coat of our blue home,
like forbidden lovers rubbing luminous
bodies, splintering, enlarging them both.

no scream was heard in the larger rupture
of them, or in the hallway, where love hangs
in dust lidded frames beside her luminous
closed eyes, ominous, like moons behind
a veil of daylight or enormous ghosts
mulling the collision of our end

my heart thundered, but I signed the collusion
anyway. the dark was large in the hallway
I ghosted around it and out the window
where fog, the lovely vibrato of a full bloom,
smoldered under the weight of the moon.
oh, luminous valve, you have set the concrete

into the illuminated hairline of our time here,
I guess any collision can be the last.
our splintered life breaths become the moon's
abled ecstasy- from our large body
to her full mouth. feed me love and
more than piss hot words of ghastly

Christ-red psalms or commandments from ghosts
that aren't spinning in the luminous cinders
of heavens encountering heavens like we are. Love,
the solution isn't in the sweaty collision
of creation's horny glands enlarging
stars and moons to touch itself:

we are all a mask of ghosts. the collisions
we steal breath from, illumed fucks that enlarge us
the dead skin of the universe, our love the moon's grief

I am Van Gogh

Jennifer Rose Horn

Third Place

Velvet sunflowers dark in prayer
bow their heads to the teary-eyed river.
I paint what they tell me, that there is
too much suffering, too much beauty
in this world. Filled with so much joy
that I can't see straight
the whole world is a blur
and this helps because
one can see the beauty
even more clearly then. Tonight
the street lamps are laying down
moons upon moons on the great black river.
I can feel the weary clouds above
making nests for nervous stars to dream in.
I want to lay forever in this kind green meadow
and just listen for the wheat field
to tell me its rough secrets. The crows are stirring
and I know the sun will soon awaken.
The sky begins to whisper pink, bleeds
the warmest orange, shouts the most magnificent
yellow, a yellow you've never seen before,
this sunrise so alive that I can't speak.
All I can do is lay my buzzing head back down
onto a million perfect blades of grass,
and let the twisted cypresses
with their ballerina arms
rock me back to sleep.

Drinking Their Request

Jennifer Rose Horn

Growing old in a meat plant
as the stars laugh at four a.m.
We could slide off the end
of this struggle, the height of screaming
to be heard. Eat the wanting to be seen.
A breakfast of longing,
a lunch of despair,
for dinner a bowl of rotting tears.
Then shit chains of meaning something
a pile of alright-ness
a wedge of acceptance.
For the [planets] are as near as clouds,
and instead of text messages, we send
paper airplanes of kissing you.
Because the freeway is just ocean waves.
You can walk on it, trust me.
And there are so many friends here waiting
for us: Keats, Eliot, Bukowski,
Dostoevsky in his finest woolen coat because it's foggy,
Shelley, Kahlo, Neruda, Van Gogh,
Bradstreet, Bradbury, Satie and Wordsworth,
Coltrane, Levine, Davis, Holiday,
Winehouse, Saroyan, always Saroyan, Poe, Matisse,
Cummings, Wilde, Cezanne and Bacon, waving damp pages
across grins of magnetic uncertainty. They are eating
pears and don't you want to join them?
Your gentle wrists bare under street lamps,
the frayed edges of your _____,
a treat to be devoured in good company.

Fyodor

Jennifer Rose Horn

Russian spring bleeds damp into narrow gutters
as my socks grow wet and rough,
cat tongue in my boots.
The cracked ice of the river is clear,
and the steady rhythm of teacups clinking promises
gives me comfort. In my hands a basket of garlic
and onions, brussels sprouts for his liver,
a tin of wild blueberries for his nerves.
All of which he will most certainly hate
and let rot. His building glitters white,
nestled in the thick morning dim.
I make my way through a hallway dark
and narrow as a murderer's mind. I know
he is listening to my footsteps creaking wood,
paranoid as he is. The tree trunk of a door
is open when I reach it, his eyes moody
and sunken, yet somehow bright as his mind.
The only light in his room from the semi-circle
of a window high on the east wall,
and one tiny bowing lantern threatening to burn the place
down. He sits squeaky on his bed of copper springs,
as I plop myself onto the worn armchair,
cracked leather scraping my elbows.
The whole place ridiculous, no one in their right mind
could stand to live here. Which is why I love him.
Those eyes grin at me in the yellow fog of his room,
and he knows my question before I even speak.
He says between clean mouthfuls of vodka,
"The goal is to be precise as the planets'
orbit, like my fingertips on your right thigh,
like your certainty that death is the end.
Precise as the second your car sailed
over that ledge. This is what I know,
and all that I can tell you."

And in the distance a train screams, *there is*
only you, as I cross the short distance to him.
Our bodies threatening to crash through the old
wooden floor, our weight exhaling time
on that weary excuse of a bed.

Woodpeckers

Alexander Flores

Honorable Mention

Where do woodpeckers go when they die?
How long do they lie in the gutters,
beneath green clouds of oak?
or do they even fall from the sky at all,
do they just stop flapping?
Sitting broken, watching
the crows inching closer to issue last rites.

Perhaps they just vanish,
otherwise wouldn't there be bodies littering the streets?
their red heads masking
blood that slowly seeps out
while beetles come to mourn.

Do they have some flowered field?
do the jays act as undertaker? do the robins dig the graves?
do they fall into a stream to be rinsed off
like the name of a girl after you get laid?

Do we just not speak of it?
like stillborn children does it cause too much grief to consider
whether the corpses of woodpeckers wither in the sun
on the ground
wings splayed out, flying into earth.

Wherefore art thou Fresno?

Alexander Flores

I have never been wandering through drizzling petals
small children with flawless skin heaved over balconies
as they celebrated the return of heroes. It is never
a fluid dance of red food color diffusing into water.
I have yet to enjoy moments of sighing glory;
passions are made bleak cinders in the sky.
I cannot say I have ever been to a bright, moonlit dinner
where we eat salads bursting with watery delight, followed
by a course of precisely cut steaks drenched in salted sauces.
The flowers I have treaded upon have all fallen into the gutters,
with refuse, and tar washed rain; waiting for the drains to unclog,
so they might slough off the road, out of sight of the wealthy
courtiers of the Riverpark shops, and gone
from the beggars on every street corner from Olive to Friant.
The street lamps turn off by three at night, and Fresno decays.
Under the smells of citrus and diesel fumes the youth all run away
to greener and bluer, less fallow lands in Berkeley and LA.
I am left here under the shade-less oleander,
while a train rumbles by and sirens sing of disaster.
In the moonless glow I strolled past dry canal streams,
and white mulberries melted on summer weary leaves.

Calwa Park

Amber Lynette Olmo

Marbles stir in aluminum cans
Along the free wall of Calwa Park
As Fresno's Lords come out to play
After three days of rain with no shine

I stand and watch these diverse figures
Laugh amongst themselves like old friends do,
As colors hiss between years of overlapping paint
From splattered fingertips that constantly pump love into these sacred
bricks

The fumes of nearly empty canisters
Pick the air clean of all the garbage,
Leaving behind a virtually purged
And extinct freedom
That our lungs have never
Had the opportunity to truly adapt to.

These makers must plaster their faces
With filtered breathers and bandanas,
Regalia adorned first and foremost
By a thriving oppressed,
To exclude themselves from the highs of paradise
Which ultimately pick apart their narrative

They have compromised—
These young and olds of art
Have developed this immunity of voice—
This ability to speak through walls as silently as possible so that
no passerby can simply walk along their painted bulletin,
without pausing for a moment to lean in toward its whisper

And I am grateful,
That the history of our people, this struggle for culture
Is allowed to thrive here—and that the pocket change

Thrown into reserving a *spot*, Goes to replenishing the swing-
set on a playground that raised me.

I retire to the sandbox and wait for hours
For these lovers to finish their caressing of walls,
So that I may run my fingers across infinity
For the first time once more.
And in doing so,

I realize, that this park—is the only park,
With swings that allow you to soar higher
Than the lampposts that guard it

Ars Poetica

Amber Lynette Olmo

This is my body—porcelain clay from the very bottom of the brook,
Bare, picked clean, and stapled together between urban trees.
A kingdom longing through the age of passing sun, to be eaten away by
the wind and crumble home.
Thine a broken temple straddled beneath grave robbers,
Who have severed and split the spiral tusk that binds me, but now
nothing more than a mare, so that I may never
Rebuild with my hips a pillar of deceased imagery— and be lost. Thus
I reverie, that a ripple of one thousand fingers carry me
Between sloth and symphony toward New Haven,
And nestle into a bed of carved cedar. At ease inside a cocoon of satin, I
simply float amongst the water imps in the warmth of my cradle,
Betwixt the cooing edge of sanity I can feel the street urchins along the
banks of ceremony, Lighting their torches as I pass through the sew-
ers of history. I can feel myself slipping back into my skin and breaking
in my bones. I can taste the truth rotting between my teeth as I reach
out to touch my world enthralled in a graffiti sky, and almost as if I can
breathe again, morning comes—and suddenly, I'm alive.

Punk Rock Poem

Nicole Randazzo

Dear Jasmine,
Punk rock just ain't the same.
Neither is feeling of sporting cherry red Doc. Martin Mary Jane's.
You were my star. The ultimate grunge girl, had the ultimate pad.
An older version of the girl I was pretending to be.
I often longed to know what it was like glide arm and arm
down the streets of tower with your cardigan clad boyfriend
Did you make love a top of his drum set?
Did you nip food crumbs from his voluptuous beard
I bet you were cool enough to call him by his real name

Tell me, Jasmine was that not good enough?
Did you feel like Courtney Love every time you injected that needle
into those hardcore veins?
Did you forget about the friendships forged?
Your father's love?
Or the little girls like me longing to be part of your world
But willing to just give you rides in order to sneak a peek?

Those sauntering lips still put forth a pout the last high you had
The infection cemented in your veins like a 5'oclock traffic jam
I know your Betty Paige bangs were still held in place as you fell to
Burt's stale living room floor
Your pink sequined ballerina slippers waiting for you at the seat you
convulsed out of
Were a size too small --They didn't fit
The night of your funeral your father showed up
Nudged a gun up to Burt and Jay's faces
Scared them so much they simultaneously dropped their ceremonial
cans of Steel Reserve 211
He blamed them for your departure, emptied his eyes out onto their
Chuck Taylor's and left

A lot has changed during the decade you've been gone.
Shitty bands like Hootie and the Blowfish have been replaced

by longhaired hillbilly bands who call themselves Nickleback.
MTV refuses to showcase music videos now
a black man finally gets to handle America's business.
Jasmine, can you believe it?

I'm 30 years old now.
Since my 22nd birthday I've been older than you.
I am married with two kids and still not even close to being hardcore.
I never had the pleasure of front lining in a band
My husband is not adorned with any ink
in fact he listens to music performed by old black men
I can't listen to Babes In Toyland or Bikini Kill in my car.
The vulgarity of it all
It's not my life anymore.
How the things I desired in you for me were fleeting.
As I drive my children to soccer practice, share a laugh or a kiss
I can't help but think of all the uncoolness you have missed.

For Abuelito

Monique Reyna

My abuelito gets home, kicks off his shoes and sits on the sofa waiting for me to bring him his beer. Worn out *de tanto pinche probeza*, still he rises with the sun every morning. No weekends or days off for his cut hands and tired feet. He tends to the lands like our ancestors. Taking beatings from the sun, still no home. Working hard all year long, still no food to last the month. Years of evolution with no progression.

Last Goodbye

Monique Reyna

Standing, wondering what is real
This must be a nightmare
Reality can't be this cruel

Big brother walks by
Places two *talles* in his little brother's hands

*One for you, one for me
Save mine for when I get there*

He bows his head
Wipes his tears
Gangsters don't cry

Mama forces herself up
Rain drops from her eyes
For her fallen son

*Mi hijo, mi nino
Dios por que?*

It's sister's turn now
There is no point
No goodbyes here
He's no longer here.

Love Song

Riley Thomas

The little frog leaps through blades
Of grass as he shimmies through mud.
The swamp brown water splashes blue
And when ruptured, bruises at touch.
This frog's surroundings, so delicate
That it pierces like a storm

As he cuts it with speed.
The frog finds the cliff rock
And cuddles the hot sun,
Kissing the unwavering heat.
And his throat sings
The pleasures the sun brings

To it. Turning his soft, slippery
Exterior tough and leathery;
Transforming and caressing his
Body. This is their song.
And in the sun's arms he lay,
Stunned silent; amazed.

Wednesday they were all very hungry

Gloria Nazzaretta

Wednesday they were all very hungry, tan pit bull rib
sticking,
sitting on thin grass strip of grey two-story, deep bass
woof,
under the carport next door.
I rescued next-door Mary's abandoned terrier last fall,
tied on a two-foot leash, with puppies.

Looking out my front door, I asked the young girl wearing
turquoise
knickers on a too cold day, if she hurt herself on the
sidewalk or wanted a new dog.
she said, "No,"
bending down to her shoe's lace on the broken
sidewalk,
last day
subletting a room there, pushing a stroller beside her son,
"Meth dealers are everywhere in this neighborhood,
I mind my own business."
I don't and buy her pizza,

while Mary sublets, too drunk to stand up,
falling over by 2:30,
rents her two story grey house Section 8 with Social
Security,
on the broken sidewalk,
Leslie promises to let me drive her to Marjorie Mason,
after her errand to Community Hospital for their shots,

but I see her much too soon, crouching in the side yard
back at Mary York's house.

Confessions of a Mexican Vegetarian

Camylle Carrizales

The smell of carne asada simmering on the stove top
still has me breathing in that intoxicating air it is swirling in
I miss the chorizo and eggs in the morning
and the spicy tamales on Christmas day
I can't even have tacos at 3 a.m. when everyone else is craving them

and I will tell the hurtful truth,
tofu can not replace
the authentic taste of menudo

Everything hits me hard, at family parties
where the endless Coronas are filling my bloodstream
and the bowls of pozole are being passed around
People sometimes say I am not a real Mexican if I am a vegetarian

But I know who I am.

I sometimes wonder why I chose to never eat carne again
But I push away the plates and resist the temptation
of those simple joys I use to love

An Ode: The Little Girl In The City

Colby Tibbet

You'd never kiss authority
so you'll sleep,
beside the bellowing coast,
where rebels, and the refined,
vibrantly abide.

Your humble yet ardent hands lifted you along
to the city's crisp breath
From a dusted, lulling valley,
to sow ones wild oats.
Not against meager bodies,
but bearing a craft,
your careful conceit.

Which are tiny ragged flags,
in which you place,
In the city's obscured view.
Down sepia-dipped hallways,
in cracks of verdant omission,
desolate fields barring insignificance
until your revered flag,
is quietly rooted in its dirt.

When I step into the city,
my long pursuit
is to find your craft,
so I can place my shoes,
precisely and positioned
to where your modest feet resided
as two pale, endearing statues.
Examining the flags,
marking what you evoked
out of your landscape, out of me
in those vivid, hidden,
cloth flags.

The Hungry

Carolina Mata

Strike a match just to smell it burn.
Pick a lily just to touch the silk.
The record's playing, but just watch it turn
as your mind feels groggy as sour milk.
Strawberry juice stains my lips;
slides like a serpent down the palm;
artily smears my finger tips.
At last-your breathing's calm.
Why are you standing over there?
Venture to me if you dare.
In flimsy dark I'm waiting here,
and the Hungry likes to share.

Two-Dimensional Art

*I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical,
that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.*

—Claes Oldenburg



Home

Erik Escovedo
First Place



The painting studio

Jarod Henry Lawrence Rocker
Second Place



Audrey

Abigail Cabrales
Third Place



In Darkened Corners

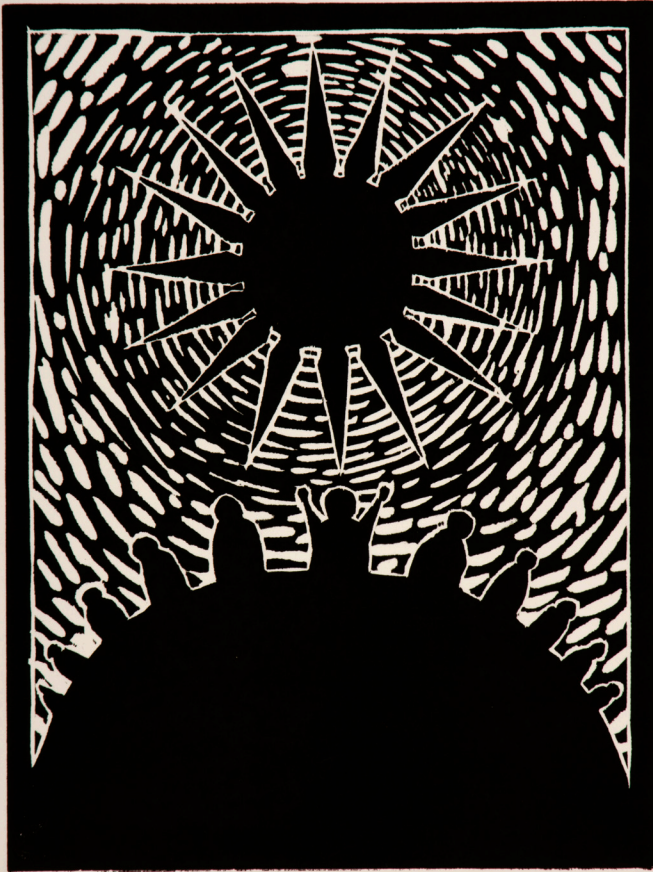
Amanda Rostykus
Honorable Mention



drifting

Andrea Diaz

Honorable Mention



1/3

Starry sky

Greyzic 2013

Starry Skies

Greyzic Magliba
Honorable Mention



weird

Jeffrey Keenan
Honorable Mention



Hooded Muse

Yuliya Gasio

Honorable Mention



Seasonal Redemption

Anyetta Freedwone



Trees

Cindy Nemeth



Falls on Me

Mason Her
Honorable Mention



What Shall I do with You?

Richard Turner



A Wizard Did It

Roxanne Bailey



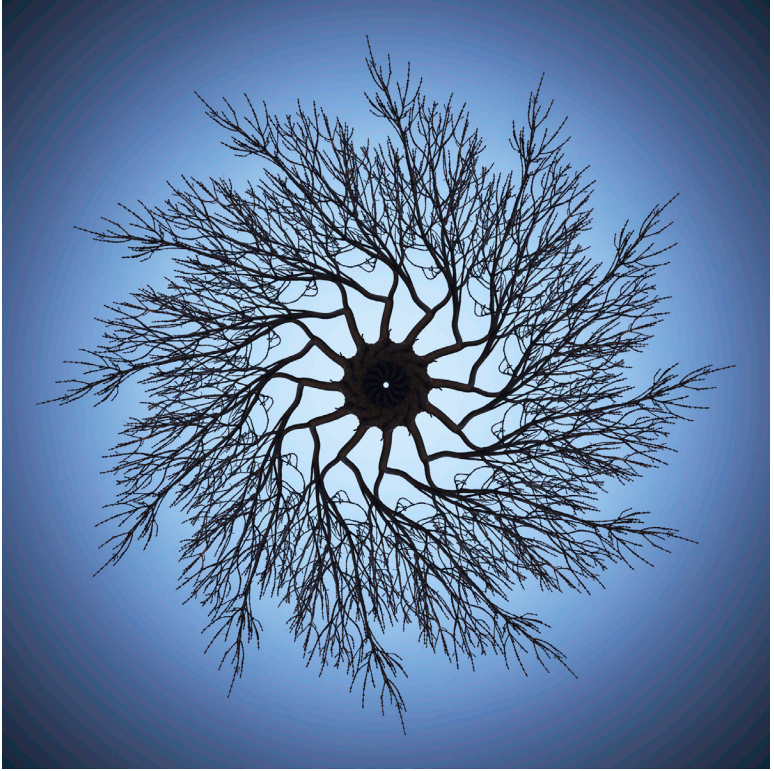
Breaking Free

Verakpeap Deng

Photography

*The camera is an instrument that
teaches people how to see without a camera.*

—Dorothea Lange



Kaleidosticks II

Jesse Merrell
First Place



Steeped

Jesse Merrell
Second Place



Sir William

Travis Rockett
Third Place



Anguish

Jesse Merrell

Honorable Mention



The Spinner

Travis Rockett
Honorable Mention

Fiction

Fiction's about what it is to be a human being.
—David Foster Wallace

“Like gloves that go on your feet instead of your hands”

Daniel E. Arias-Gomez

First Place

“Did you hear that?”

She struggled for air as she breathed the words out. And of course, the very fact that she was speaking meant that her lips were no longer upon mine. She was always so paranoid when it came to this, always as nervous as a deer, head bent down to a body of water, eyes dancing frantically from side to side in search of predators.

“I didn’t hear anything”

And I hadn’t said that just so that she would turn to me once more, letting her body fall again on mine, pushing her swollen lips on me, wrestling my own in that shivering battle for dominance. My voice had a dim timbre of frustration but it spoke the truth. The only thing I could hear was the syncopated duet of our hurried breathing. Yet she remained as if I had said nothing. I lay beneath her, drowning in the jagged hills of her bed, embraced and teased by her scent, which rose from everything and everywhere around me, especially her mattress. To think that every night her body spread where now mine did. Her tender frame, sleeping, forgotten to the world; that image was as incomprehensible to me as the moment of creation, as death. And dying I was as my eyes rose timidly towards her. She was still clad in her school uniform, as was I. She knelt on the bed, on top of me, one half-naked leg anchored on the sheets to each side of my hips. The sun caused the minuscule forest of blonde hairs that plagued her arms, usually invisible, to glisten as if suddenly ablaze. Her thighs peered from beneath the folds of her skirt, a smooth piece of clothing laced in blue and brown colors, earth and sky mingled together to cover the rest of her legs out of sight, the fiery core of the earth, the secret golden garden, rolling hills of skin disappearing into the night. Above, her white shirt, the top two buttons undone, a brief sample of the bare skin of her chest, rising up and down as if inviting me to uncover it completely. And then, her face, wrapped in a tangled net of hair bristling in colors that ranged from the brown of mud to the simmering yellow of the sun. Her face, not looking at me but turned to the window instead; that deer face again, of which I could only glimpse the

profile, one fearful eye.

I waited, as I always did, for that worry tinged with a smudge of horror to secede from her expression, as it always did. Always, but not this time. Instead, one of her legs lifted to the air as if part of an acrobatic routine and she dismounted me; her body propelled swiftly to her window. Not without a sigh more pronounced than it could have been, I rose to my feet and approached the crystal from which the warm snakes of light crawled into her bedroom. With lazy eyes I peered outside and saw nothing but the patch of grass that lay across the street, one lonely tree crowning its center. Nothing was moving but the branches of the tree as they danced extravagantly under the currents of air. I turned my head to her, picturing our bodies pressed together again, dancing our own extravagant waltz. I opened my mouth but stopped; no word dared endure the terrified mask that suddenly coated her face.

“It’s my parents”

Part horrified, part amused at the shivering tone of her voice, I gazed one more time out the window, sure of the fact that the only problem we faced was that of her paranoia reaching new heights of exaggeration. What little amusement had permeated my face was gone as I saw the white monster slouching along the street, that mythical creature of which I knew only from tales told to me by Mariana and her brother, and believe me, not warm stories those. With anxious eyes we stood by the window as the pale beast trudged on towards us like a predator. Even the dancing tree seemed to grow nervous, frantically moving its arms as if trying to warn us: run, run fool! It said. Yet we stood, watching the white Jeep draw closer by the second until Mariana suddenly stepped back and uttered a faint cry, her extremities flailing in panic like those of the tree.

“What are we going to do?”

She murmured to herself as she paced like a kid that needs to use the bathroom but doesn’t quite know how. All the while I kept my face against the crystal in an effort to catch a brief glimpse of the driver of the Jeep, approaching as undeniable as a tidal wave. She peeked one last, somber time outside and then grabbed my hand. “Come with me” she ordered, and before I could reply she took my arm and towed me with an irrefutable force. I was dragged from her bedroom as the white Jeep docked in the garage just below her window. In one final effort I stretched my neck and shot a glance at the car’s windshield but caught

only an ephemeral vision of two stout hands gripping the steering wheel in a merciless hold. The next second I was tumbling down the stairs, being pulled by Mariana's iron hand, my feet dancing swiftly as I tried not to trip and roll all the way down; that I managed to land on my feet at the bottom of the staircase seemed to me a miracle. Once down there, I turned my head; the front door stood before me like a monolith, white and stretching far above my head, an unreal sculpture that had lost all logical meaning, and for the first time I felt fear's cold fingers caressing the back of my neck. But before I could ponder this further, I was again pulled furiously by the arm and away from the faceless monolith.

Like soldiers plowing through a frantic battlefield we ran, heads down as if to avert enemy gunfire, moving down the dining room, into the kitchen, and finally past the sleeping machines that dwelled in the laundry room, faded white and stinking of detergent. We ran, but my eyes remained towards the front door. All the while I was almost expecting to see the wooden frame kicked open in an explosion of splinter and shrapnel, a coat of dust rising from the ground, and behind it, the silhouette of something half-human, half-demon staring down with bloody eyes and clamoring in a bellowing voice: "You think you can lay your filthy fingers on my daughter and get away with it?! Now I will defile you!" And then the overwhelming beast would charge right at me, my fate decided. Yet no such creature appeared; the door remained still and lifeless, that faded white paler than ever.

We stopped for a brief moment in the laundry room as Mariana opened the door to the back yard. An echoing metallic sound coming from the rusted door's lock exploded within the small room as I wondered idly (and not without a devious grin) if Mariana's colorful collection of underwear would be nesting inside the washing machine or one of the baskets that littered the room. Then I heard a high-pitched and long squeal as the iron door gave way to the backyard; sunlight poured greedily in, falling on everything like a hungry animal, warm to the skin of my arms and face. Before I could utter a sound, I was thrown furiously outside, like a drunk from a bar, and into the green carpet of grass that napped lazily under a beautiful day of blue sky and calm air.

"Wait here."

This time I didn't even bother with a reply; it was a good thing

because the door was screaming once again before the words were completely out of Mariana's mouth. The door closed with a strenuous thunder, and then there was nothing; nothing but the frail sunlight washing over me, as if trying to calm me down. I looked around, not daring to move lest I make a sound that would attract the unwanted attention of the legendary monster known as "mi suegro". My body was trembling slightly; hell, I was scared, I won't lie to you. I don't know exactly how long did I stand there but it seemed to me at that time that it had to have been at least half a day. And all the while, a universe of thoughts paraded through my mind like performers on a pageant, the most prominent of them being: "Can't I just escape from here and avoid this whole situation?" No, I couldn't. The backyard was pretty much one big square of grass; a tall, sturdy wall coated pink rose along its perimeter. Even if I could climb it somehow, I would fall into another such square, and then if I was seen, I would have to give some explanations. So I decided to wait.

I turned to face the hoary iron door, and I wondered. What if? What if when that door moans open again, I see not the golden head Mariana, but rather the ravenous face of her father? Would he say something to me as he opens the door? Would he even expect me to be there? But above all, I wondered, what would I say if such an event occurred? I could see it in my head: "Who are you?" the man would ask, astonished to find me standing there, a complete stranger, as still as a statue decorating his backyard. "Why, wait a second!" I would reply, "This is not my house! What am I doing here?!" After that, laughter almost forced its way out of my struggling lips, yet I didn't have to fight it long, for the metallic thud of the lock resonated once more, heavier than the world, louder than thunder. The door then opened with a dramatic slowness that I thought only happened in movies. I was so scared that my eyes fell to the ground like anchors falling freely to the depths of the sea. What would it be, beauty or beast? The door cried open. I could not see who stood there. My eyes crawled slowly through the floor in the direction of the door, my head still low. What I found there both amazed and calmed me. It was Mariana's feet. They were encased in a pair of socks composed of stripes of all colors, pink, white, red, blue, yellow, green. But what really caught my eye were the toes. Her socks were the kind that have individual sleeves for each finger, you know, like gloves that go on your feet instead of your hands. Each toe was a different color too; how silly,

I thought. And yet I remained there, unable to move. At that moment, the universe seemed to collapse upon itself, life suddenly too incomprehensible, too mysterious in its unlimited possibilities for definition. And then, as if her socks were not ridiculous enough, she started wriggling her toes; they squirmed like multicolored worms. To this I had to smile. I finally looked up and there she was, her face drenched in sunlight and also smiling. She was as radiant as fire; if this was due to the day's light bouncing off her skin, or because of her iridescent smile, I couldn't tell you. I just remember thinking: "My God, she is beautiful".

But this Brief Glimpse of Joy was indeed short, for before I could notice, she had clasped my arm once more and we had dived right back into the war zone. Only this time, there was an unexpected development. As we ran back into the dining room, I saw Mariana's mother standing by the stairs. She looked amused. Mariana seemed not to be surprised. As we ran past her, she said: "Mom, this is my boyfriend, the one I told you about." The woman did not reply in sound, but instead glanced at me, smiled, and waved her hand merrily. I responded with a blush and my own embarrassed smile, shrugging shyly and apologetically. Then she was gone. And for the second time that day, I was thrown by my girlfriend from her house, rather rudely I might add.

"I'll call you."

Then the door spoke one final exclamation as it shut closed. Mariana's voice still lingered in my ears, fading away by the second.

"Bye." I whispered to the pale monolith and then walked away without looking up to make sure there was no one looking through the windows.

As I reached the lonely tree that I had glimpsed before from a different vantage point, I embraced it like an old friend. I turned back, one arm still wrapped around the wooden trunk, and I took in the sight that was Mariana's house, drenched in that awful color that we jokingly called "smurf-blue." From where I was, I could see her window. I could see the doorway that stands where it has always stood, the one that spread above us as we kissed for the first time; the one, where later, we would hold each other for the last time. All in all, I thought, that hadn't been a bad day after all, not a bad day at all.

I sighed with the happy carelessness of youth and started to make my way to the bus stop. I hadn't taken five steps when I stopped sud-

denly. My hands delved into every pocket of my torn pants in frantic movements, but my fingers found nothing, as I knew they would, for I didn't have any money for the bus fare. I had planned on asking Mariana to give me five pesos for the ride back home, but after all the mayhem had started, the issue of bus money fell from my list of priorities, as it now climbed to the top of it. I idled nervously for a moment, unsure of what to do. But I knew I couldn't go back, not after everything that we had gone through to avoid a meeting between father and boyfriend. So once again I sighed, not so happily this time, and I kept on walking. The problem, you see, was that Mariana lived in the outskirts of the city. It was two hours away on bus from my house, and that translated into a lot of walking. It would probably take me about four and a half hours to get home like that.

When I got to the chewing gum-plastered electric pole that served as a bus stop, I halted and leaned against it anyway. Who knows, I thought, maybe the bus driver would have pity on me and let me ride for free. It was then that I noticed the minutest star of light signaling at me from the littered street. I bent down and clasped a gray, metallic circle between my fingers. I knew just by the color and size of it what it was, yet I brought it to my eyes anyway, wanting to make sure. Yes, it was a coin. Five pesos, the exact price of a bus ride home. My neck twisted, my head turned skyward, laughter roared from me, fighting against the descending light of the evening. I kept on laughing, still leaning to the chewing gum-plastered pole as light faded lazily into night. A few scandalized stars had made their subtle appearance in the firmament; they stared at me openly, as if wondering why I was laughing, as if wondering what it would feel like to laugh.

By the time I got to my house, it was night time. By the time I got to my house, the memory of that day was already a relished treasure. Even now I still remember it fondly. I remember lying in Mariana's bed, swimming in her scent, feeling the delicate weight of her body against mine, her skin, tender, shimmering, sinuous. I remember what her lips tasted like: strawberry gum. I remember my tortuous time waiting in the backyard, and the amused expression of Mariana's mother as we hurried past her; I still laugh when I think of that odd introduction. I remember the bus stop and the impossible luck of finding my fare waiting for me there. I remember how I laughed, filled as I was with tired happiness. I remember the ride home, staring through the window of the bus at the running city lights, trying intensely

to hold on to Mariana's kisses. But most of all, I remember her feet, tucked safely away inside her socks, each toe in its own private sleeve, and all dancing together with clumsy carelessness. I remember everything.

My God, we were beautiful.

“Pain”

Emanuel Hernandez

Second Place

His name was Tank; at least that is what he was known as. Maybe years ago he was a Tank, a physical specimen of sheer brutality. But now he was older, and carried around a good 20 years of beer drinking around his midsection. He was the champion. He was the one the up and comers came to, and one by one they just were not able to take away his belt. But this time was different; Erik was the new breed of fighter. The kind who didn't do it as a weekend hobby, who wasn't here just because he was told he was the toughest person ever by his circle of friends. He was here because this was his life. He lived and breathed for it, this was all he knew. And this night in this cage they were isolated like an island out at sea. The bright lights like little suns shining down making only their island visible. It was just Erik and Tank.

And at this moment Erik had Tank pinned up against the cage. Tank's legs wrapped up between Erik's. Erik had him pressed up against the cage in such a way that Tank was half way turned on his side, his back against the cold metal. Tank tried to wiggle free, but he was worn out and beaten. With every movement Tank made to attempt to free himself, Erik moved to counter it. And as soon as he had his opening Erik went in for the kill. It started off with short punches with his left, coming in at an angle. They didn't do the damage, but they got Tank to open up more, and with that opening Erik started to rain down blows with his right. The first didn't land flush, but with the second Erik could feel Tank's orbital bone crack. Tank's blood splattered on Erik's fist and forearm, the spit and blood flying out of Tank's mouth and spilling on the canvas soaking it. Erik's breathing became heavier and heavier at the sight of Tank helpless beneath him. The smell of blood and sweat filling his senses made something click inside him. Tank was helpless beneath Erik and as he rained down his fists, he could hear his father in the back of his mind, his father taunting him, telling him he isn't a man, telling him he will never be a man. His father's voice in his mind only made Erik surge with more aggression, more violence. Is this what his father wanted to teach him what a real man is? Someone who asserts their dominance, and shows no mercy? He could have stopped here, Tank was finished, but he wasn't out so Erik proceeded to rain down damage. He

counted in his head; one, two, three, each blow driving Tank's head down making it bounce off the canvas, four, five, and before he could get to six the referee pulled him off. Erik didn't realize that Tank was knocked out cold with the third hit. For a second he felt bad for Tank, but that all went away when he told himself how if the tables were turned Tank would have done the same thing. For years Tank was the man, for years he hasn't lost, and not once has he ever been knocked out or manhandled like that by anyone. And Erik did it all with his hands.

Erik ran to his corner, his arms raised. His corner men embraced him, his coach hugging him the way a father might hug a son who just won the championship game in High School. For the first time in twenty three years, Eric felt what it would be like to have a father proud of his son. The noise from the crowd was now near deafening. Their cheers and yells were the loudest he has ever heard. Yet he could still make out what his coach told him. "This is what you trained for. This moment is what you earned. Don't forget what brought you here." And how can Erik forget all the things that brought him here; the promise he made to himself to never again let a man beat him down, the promise he made his brother to always take care of him, to one day be the father that his own would and could never do. He was now the Champion, he was now the one they would come to in order to prove themselves, and he was now on top of the food chain. The referee called Erik over to the center of the cage, the announcer now in there with them.

"The referee has called a stop to this fight at two minutes and thirty six seconds of the second round by Knock out and new Cage Warriors Middleweight champion, Erik the Gorilla Gomez."

With that the referee raised Erik's hand. He may not have been in the big show, earning the big bucks, but at this moment, Erik felt like the baddest man on the planet. He speed up his answers when the promoter interviewed him after the fight. He didn't care to talk about how he felt, if being champion was everything he ever wanted, and what does he see next in line. Erik kept his answers short and to the point.

"Yes, being champ is everything I wanted" "I see me kicking more ass to come. If someone wants this belt they have to take it, and they are not going to." Erik just didn't care to keep answering questions. He wanted out of the cage. He fought to fight and to win, not to talk.

And it wasn't that he didn't care but all he could think about was the after party. And all the cage bunnies ready to get down, and he knew it wouldn't be too hard. Not because these girls were easy, but with his dark hair and eyes, and well defined body he knew he had the physical looks to get their attention.

Her name was Tiffany, or was it Amber. Hell, it could have been Jennifer. It really didn't matter. All that mattered was that her face wasn't fucked up, the doctor did a great job on the tits, and her ass was a perfect size. The pair drunkenly made their way to his apartment. At one point she let her dinner out in the hallway. But Erik didn't care; he wasn't going to kiss her anyway. It took a few tries to find the right key, but Erik managed to get the door open. Even with his stupor Erik knew the path to take from the front door to his bedroom without knocking into shit. He avoided the large glass table, the leather couch, and all the scattered toys. Erik knew this situation all too well. He closed his bedroom door, to keep the person in the next room from waking up. The pair started to do their thing. Erik knew how to pick them; she was feisty and an expert with her mouth. The gagging just turned him on even more. The taste of her skin, the smell of her sweat the sound of her body and the screams excited him. Her body bent over the bed, her back arched up as he pulled her hair. He was the animal, he was in the cage again. The sensation was the same but the situation was the only difference. He was in control and this is how he liked it. But the alcohol was getting to him. Erik just laid himself on the bed and let her get on top and do her thing so he could half sleep and half fuck.

Erik woke up and noticed she was still here. He sighed to himself. Usually they leave by now. They know the drill. She turned over and smiled at him.

"My legs still feel like jelly." She laughed, smiling at him with her eyes open, waiting for a response.

Erik turned his head to her and half smirked, "You're welcome."

Erik moved up putting his back against the head board. As she got out of his bed, he wiped his eyes as he stared at her looking at the few photos he had on his oak dresser. He sighed as he realized he must have passed out before he could give her cab money. She held up a photo of a young boy.

"Is this your brother?" she asked

"No, that's my son." Erik replied, shaking last night's debauchery from his mind.

“Oh, my god! He is so cute! He has your dimples. So, is this his mom?” she held up a photo of Erik’s son being held by a stunning brunette with a half open smile shy yet inviting, wearing a hipster perfectly placed as to not cover too much hair.

“No, she’s just someone I knew.” Erik replied, that lie became easier and easier with every woman. She wasn’t someone he just knew, she was special to him, much more special than these girls he treated like just another exercise, but it didn’t matter anymore. She was gone, and he was here.

“An ex-girlfriend?”

“You can say that. We dated for a bit. She had her chance, but it just didn’t work out.” Erik’s voice cracked a little. He hated personal questions and he especially hated personal questions about certain things in his past.

“What’s her name?”

“Look it was fun and all; you’re an awesome chick, but does it really fucking matter what her name is? She isn’t my woman.”

She could sense the change in Erik’s voice. She knew she crossed a line. Putting the photo back down, she smiled at him.

“If you want I can fix us up some breakfast.”

“That sounds nice, but I have to clean up and head out to see my family.”

“ohh ummm ok. Well, here is my number. If you ever want to hang out again just give me a call.” She wrote her number on a piece of paper she pulled out from her purse and handed it to Erik, giving him a kiss before she made her way out. Erik rubbed his eyes and got out of bed. Placing her number on his dresser, he sighed. He fixed up the photos putting them back in their specific spots.

As Erik fumbled around the kitchen looking for what to throw in with the eggs, he could hear the door to the other room opening. Erik’s back was turned but he could hear the footsteps approaching. Erik started to mix the eggs and bologna, and said.

“Hey bro, we’re going to the parents today, so make sure you dress nice.”

“I know. Did you win last night?”

Erik turned around, putting the scrambled eggs on two plates. “Yeah, I won.” He smiled as he said this. A sort of cocky smile. Erik’s brother reached over and touched the bruise around Erik’s left eye.

“Does it hurt?”

“No, it’s ok.”

“Are you sure?” Erik’s brother proceeded to touch the bruise more as if his fingertips would somehow heal it.

“Yeah I’m sure, guys like you and me can take a hit, and just keep on going.” Erik smiled as he said this. There was more truth to that than just his cage fighting. The both of them went through more in childhood than anyone should face. Erik could remember every fight, every bruise, and every tear. He was sixteen when he got out of there and moved in with his grandparents upstate. He felt horrible about it. He felt as if he abandoned his brother. But his grandparents were old. Erik was able to take care of himself and he knew they wouldn’t be able to care for him. So for four years he waited. He saved up enough and moved back to Southern California, and got his older brother out of there.

Erik and his brother continued to eat their breakfast. Unlike the living room which was cluttered with toys, the kitchen was immaculately clean. Everything was in order from the cloth placemats on the small wooden table, to the organization of the blender, toaster, and microwave on the tile counter. She would always keep the kitchen clean, the one place he felt they were a family. And with her gone he became the kitchen’s keeper. Keeping it like she always did gave Erik a sense of normalcy after the disaster.

“Erik, was that girl a friend?” His brother asked, still chewing toast.

“You saw her?”

“Mmmhmm, you have a lot of friends, but they never stay. Do you make them mad?”

Erik just looked at his brother trying his best not to laugh he was happy that his brother still didn’t fully understand what was going on. “They are just one time friends. It’s better that way.”

“Well, at school I tell my friends I love them and they are always my friends.” His brother said, bits of egg falling out of his mouth. His brother made a valid point and he knew it, but I Love You wasn’t something he was going to toss out there, especially now.

After they finished their breakfast Erik sent his brother to his room to get ready, and he washed the dishes. After getting ready and packed, the two piled in Erik’s car and made their way to the parents. Erik’s car was a mess, full of protein bar wrappers, and energy drink cans. And it smelled like one too many new car scent trees. Erik’s apartment was close to downtown. Near everything that kept him busy. Their

parent's house was at one point out in the country, but the growing population turned the country into a suburb.

The old white two story home was the same as Erik remembered growing up. The same two cars in the driveway, his father's beat up work truck, and the old once red Explorer. The lawn green and manicured like always. Erik smiled in relief as he recalled it was his job to maintain the yards when he was still living here. His father and uncles on the porch playing dominoes like they do every Sunday.

"Your mom's inside. Help her get the table ready." His father said in his broken English.

"Ok, dad." Erik respected his father. He worked sometimes 12 hour days to make sure the bills were paid and they all had clothes on their backs and food on their plates. In a way Erik wished he could be that type of father, the provider. He respected the man, but he didn't love him. How could he love the man who taught him how to fight by beating the shit out of him until his teens when Erik became big enough to defend himself? How could he love a man who treated his brother like a hindrance? How could he love a man who hit his wife after one too many beers? He respected the father, but hated the man. Before the brothers could walk inside Erik's father grabbed his arm.

"Mijo, what happened to your eye?"

"I had a fight last night dad, you know that."

"Did you win?"

"Yes I did. I actually won the belt, and I'm the new champion for my weight class."

His father laughed. "I didn't know they let boys fight girls."

Erik forced out a chuckle as he opened the door. A thousand times he imagined his father across from him inside the cage. Just the two of them locked inside, no way out until one of them wins. And for five minutes he would beat his father like he beat him, without mercy or remorse. He would ignore his father's cries for help, and his pleas to make it stop. He would leave his father on the mat broken and bloody. He would feel his father's blood on his hands, on his face, on his body, the warmth of it bringing comforting chills to him. But those are just thoughts; after his mother learned what Erik did for a living she made him promise he would never hit his father. She knew how he felt, and she knew it was up to her to make sure something like that wouldn't happen.

The inside of the home was cluttered with photos of loved ones and

images of saints. The living room was spacious. The two large couches could sit eight people comfortably and the fireplace which was almost never on was adorned with more photos and numerous ceramic angles. Erik's mother, a short woman with thick black hair and deep brown eyes, ran up to the two brothers, giving them both hugs and kisses. Erik's brother loved the affection but ran to the kitchen as soon as he smelled the fresh cookies.

"Mijo, que paso con tu ojo?" His mother asked as she touched the large bruise.

"It's nothing mom, I had a fight last night." As he explained what happened he couldn't help but notice the fresh bruise on her eye. His body started to tense.

"Mom, what happened?" He didn't know why he asked. He knew what happened.

"Tu padre tomo muchos cheves y no esi la comida bien."

"Mom you can't let him do that to you. Next time call me and I'll come over, ok?" Again he didn't know why he told her, she stayed with his father after years and years of abuse, and he knew in his heart she would never leave him. He knew that to her his father needed her.

"Mijo, le dije que eso te va a matar."

"Mom, don't worry, I'm good at it."

"Pero..."

"Mom, I said don't worry, I'm good at it. It's what I want to do, and it pays the bills."

Erik hated the fact that his mom worried about him so much, he wasn't a kid anymore. He beat people up for a living, and yet his mother still acted like he was that little kid who would ask her for cookies, and believed in Santa Clause. But there was nothing he could do to make her not worry; he would just tell himself that maybe that's a mother's job, to worry.

Erik sat with his family for dinner, the smells of homemade arroz con pollo, and carne con chile filled Erik with that at home sense he could never get in his apartment. Like always his mother served everyone first, starting with his father and ending with his brother. The bright red plates covered with food. There was no room left on the large rectangular table. All of his father's brothers were here. Erik sat by his brother making sure he didn't make a mess, and cleaning it up if he did.

"So Erik when are you getting a real job?" His father asked.

“I have a job dad, remember?”

“Yeah but fighting isn’t a job. You need to do something with your life. That’s why she left you, you didn’t have goals.” Erik sighed, his fist clenched. It had been years since she left, and yet even now he hated it when she was brought up. He didn’t hate her, but the past is the past for a reason.

“She left because she found someone else she wanted to be with. Nothing I can do about that.” Erik replied, his voice angry.

“She found another man because you weren’t man enough, mijo. You treated her like she was how do you say...un angel de oro, and women need a man to tell them how it is, not promises.” Erik’s mother sensing the tension raised her voice.

“I saw her at her work. I went for coffee and she was there. She is very nice mijo, maybe one day you two can make it work.”

“She made her decision mom; she left for that James guy. The nurse.”

Erik’s father laughed. “You see, mijo? She left you for a nurse. If you were man enough, she wouldn’t even think about leaving.” Erik’s father’s voice grew more and more condescending.

“Dad it wasn’t like that. she told me it just wasn’t going to work out. we were too different.”

“And you believe her? She said that to you and went back to that nurse and fucked him.” Erik finished the food he had in his mouth. His body was hot. He only felt this way when he was in the cage and ready to hurt someone. He stood up from his chair.

“Dad don’t talk like that, ok? She isn’t a whore, she just moved on.”

“Mijo she moved on when she was still with you. That isn’t what a good woman does. And that’s a good thing, you two didn’t look right.”

“And what does that mean, dad?” Erik’s voice grew louder, his burning eyes focused on his father.

“I mean she was above you mijo. You make what enough money to pay the bills. A girl like her wanted a man that can spoil her, and you’re too nice. She didn’t need a nice guy, she needs a man.”

“And what would you know, dad? Want me to beat her like you beat mom?” Erik’s gaze on his father was like that of a hunter about to shoot his prey, ready to kill. Erik’s father now stood up. The man of the house was challenged and he wasn’t going to let things slide.

“You don’t talk to me like that ok, hijo de puta. You might be some cage fighter, but I’ll still kick your fucking ass.”

“You really think so dad, a man that hits his wife and beats his son

until he gets old enough to fight back, you're going to kick my ass?" All the uncles moved their chairs; in their almost drunk state they were ready to see a show. Erik's father now walked up to him, pointing and pushing with his finger.

"You think you're better than me, more of a man?"

"No dad, I know I am."

At this point his father hit Erik in the face. Erik had taken many hits in his career and this was nothing to him. Erik just turned and smiled. "Is that all you got?" Before his father could hit him again Erik moved out of the way and punched his father in the stomach, knocking him to the floor. Erik's mother ran between them crying, pleading for them to stop. Erik's hands were still clenched. He was ready to keep going to keep inflicting pain, and it was during moments like this when Erik was the one causing pain that he didn't feel his own. He could see the tears in his mother's eyes and he just shook his head. "If you know what's good for you dad, stay down." He then turned to his mom. "I'm sorry mom. Me and Hector are going to leave now. The food was great. Thank you." With that Erik and Hector left, and made their way back to their apartment. On the drive Erik's hands were still shaky. In a way he felt bad that he hit his father, but in a way he knew it had to be done. A part of him also wished it was that James guy he was hitting, but he knew that wouldn't win her back.

The next morning Erik made his way to the coffee shop. It was some trendy new age coffee place, not the Starbucks his ex worked at. He ordered his coffee and bagel and just sat at the only empty table. He sat there with his face down, his way of isolating himself. He pulled out a crumbled piece of paper from his pants pocket. He straightened it out on the table and saw the phone number; before he could get himself to call he crumbled it back up and put it in his pocket again.

"Hey, Erik." A familiar woman's voice asked. Erik looked up and smiled.

"Sorry, I . . . it's hard to remember names."

She pointed at her nametag. "It's Amber. So what are you doing here, stalking me?" she laughed.

"Nah, just wanted some coffee." He said, he looked up at her to get a better look and saw the same face and smile from the morning. He smiled a little.

"Well, I get off work in like thirty minutes; maybe we can catch up,

and see a movie or something?”

“That would be nice, but I can’t leave my brother alone for long.”

“Your brother?” she asked.

“Yeah, he lives with me, he has downs and I watch out for him.”

“Well, maybe we can just rent a movie or something. People still do that, right?” she laughed again.

“Sure, that sounds nice.” Erik didn’t really care about the women he picked up. They were just around for one thing. But maybe she was different. “Just as long as you don’t run off with some nurse.” He laughed.

She smiled and put her hands on his. “I like tough guys like you, not nurses.”

“Whisper”

Bailey Marie Robertson

Third place

The mirrors line the walls in an endless representation of what we shouldn't look like. Everywhere we turn, the reflection shoots back an angry accusation. With each leap, a hiss emits from the glass, reminding us of our human lack of grace; a reporter on our infinite number of faults.

Higher.

Faster.

Lighter.

The words slip in and around us, into our bones that we count as we step around the hardwood floor that seems to jump up to our toes, pushing us higher, faster, and beg us to be lighter. We cannot escape each other's watchful eyes, spying on the competition that springs into the thick, sweaty air around us. The hardwood floor burns into the balls of our feet, threatens to blister through our heels. This will not stop for another hour.

For some, this will never stop.

At the sound of the sharp whistle in the wet lips of the instructor, we are allowed a five minute break. My moment is finally here. I can feel my stomach screaming and stretching, a punishment for my organs, and threatening to burst into my lungs and up my throat and out of my chapped, stained lips. I grab my shawl as a barrier against the frost-coated wind. A few other girls make similar decisions, but we have a secret, unspoken code. We know who runs to which buildings during the break, and where never to trespass. This is our private, but shared horror. This is the only thing getting us through to the next hour of class.

The night air is biting, and no matter how close I pull the shawl, the wind whips around me and threatens to toss me into this tree or that branch. Head down, I head for the Business Administration building that is unoccupied this time of night. There are so few students on campus at this hour, and this is an unbelievable relief not to have to use one of the dingier facilities in order to avoid prying eyes and disgusted glares; or worse, the furrowed brow of a worried official.

Avoid those with power that wish to lock you up.

The ever-present voice in my head whispers with venom on her

tongue, urging me on with blind eyes. My feet know the path and I could run here in my sleep. I should be leaping there, practicing for my return. Too many of the girls are edging up to my place, and this is not acceptable.

You fucking loser.

I try to shut out the sound of her, but she's there, lingering. She might as well be running alongside me, behind me, in front of me. She is everywhere all at once, and in that fact, I take a certain comfort that many would not understand. Who would wish for a demon to be constantly pushing them? She pushes me to be better, faster, and stronger. Better, better, better.

Finally, with three minutes left on my break, I reach my destination. Pulling the door gets harder every time I come here, causing pain in my arms as I use my whole body to enter my paradise. I take a brief inventory: no one loitering outside, threatening to expose me; no shoes under the stall doors, either. Without thinking another moment, I rush into the big bathroom that has its own sink and mirror and lock the door behind me.

You fucking loser. What took you so long?

Sticky toilet paper attaches itself to the bottom of my shoe, which disgusts me, but I ignore it. I only have two more minutes until I have to be back in the dance room. I can't afford to be late. My nerves are already shot from a day full of the regularly stressed out parents and friends in my life.

Friends? What friends? They don't care about you anymore, drama queen. No one needs you now. Why would they? All you ever want to do is talk about yourself and your problems and people are sick of it. You know it. I'm the only one left. Don't worry; I am not going to leave you, ever. I'm yours, and you are mine.

The comforting, slicing words propel me toward the toilet. I lift the repulsive seat and lean forward. Pressing my stomach, I feel for the spot: the spot that has saved my knuckles from scars and venomous film all over shaking hands. The reaction from my own worn-out body is almost instantaneous. Into the water goes the half of an apple I promised to scarf for energy and after that comes the four slices of muffin I allotted myself for breakfast. I know I have finished when the shocking violet of the blueberries is in front of me. I have color-coded my purging for efficiency.

This takes less than a moment, or maybe it takes an hour, but either

way, I flush the toilet and turn to the mirror behind me. A cousin of the mirror I will face on the hardwood floors, perhaps. I wash my mouth out with the faucet water and wipe the tell-tale tears from my bloodshot eyes. The swelling in my face will go down in a few minutes. No broken blood vessels this time, but my glands feel like they are throbbing. Maybe there isn't even any blood left.

Good girl. Now run back, you have one minute to be back in front of those mirrors. Go, you fucking cow and now you know better than to act like a pig in the morning. An apple. Honestly. You couldn't resist an apple? You are so fucking worthless. Have some self-control and you wouldn't have to have such a disgusting habit.

Without wasting another moment, I leap from the bathroom like Superman out of his phone booth, with a feeling of faux energy that I needed. I run back into the gym, exactly as Madame blows her whistle. Other girls look on, finishing up their bottle of water or small cookie, and I can feel their envy. I suppress a smile. They know and they don't know, but either way, they are envious of the lines of my body and Madame's approving nods as I stretch. They wish they, too, never needed a snack break. I am always ready for the whistle, always eager to work.

I am strong.

I am stronger than them.

The mirror is waiting.

Colophon

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