



## In the Small Hours

Your anger is a gift. That's what they told me. So I wound wraps around bruised knuckles, sunk my hands into sixteen-ounce boxing gloves, and punched through years of my life.

The gift comes with pain. With loss. They don't tell me unleashing my anger won't bring my mother back. They tell me instead to step into the pain. They say you have to press forward, take the punches coming in, roll your shoulder if you can, absorb if you can't. What I do is absorb. *Pah-pah, pah-pah*. I hear the punches when I walk these rainy streets. I

hear them when I sleep. I hear them in the small hours on my knees in the dark, running my cut-up hands over the soft carpet. If I can become the punches, I think. If I can become.

What I don't know how to do is stop looking for my mother. Her dream was to ride tandem with a Vietnam vet through the Smoky Mountains. She had rules. Things like, they must have fought infantry like her late husband, crawled through the mud and monsoons. They must have bled hard and known the sour taste of hot-iron blood. And when I catch a swift, sharp hook to the jaw and feel that blood pooling on my tongue, I think of my mother. Or a likeness of what I think she has become now. The thing is, it's not always my mother that I see. I have loved only women who look like her, who will turn and walk that careless stride away from me, fists closed, dark hair rippling in the sun, because the only thing I really know is what it feels like to be left.

What I don't want to say is that I am her. To not say it is a lie. I run as she runs. I've chased my pain through the South Pacific, across the whole of Europe,

from one American coast to the other, touching ground on the dry, the wet, the freezing, each unforgiving continent of our earth. What I don't understand is stability. What I breathe is absence, longing, the short, hard breaths of impermanence and the constant movement of a vagabond life.

The thing is, the ring is quite small. You can move for days but go nowhere. You can pin someone into a corner, get them up against the ropes, and blast away. Body, body, head. Hook, hook, uppercut. You learn to cut off the ring. You learn to seek your opponent like radar and stick to them, close the distance, the idea that if you cut that ring off enough, they've got nowhere left to go. And you can let them have it then. You can step into their desperate punches, too. You can feel that pain. It will leave marks. It better leave marks. Because you want to know you've walked into trenches. You want to know that you're building your armor, that at some point, when it's not so dark outside and the rain lets up, you'll understand better why you cry shopping alone at the grocery store, why seeing a baby makes you short of breath, why your hands are so capable of holding but do nothing but try to grasp, to pull people back, to say, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," out into the cold, open air.

But you reason it out. Like all things. Your anger is a gift, and a fist, after all these years, is so easy to make.