

Jonathan Starke

Penitence

I NEVER SAW MY FATHER bleed before. But there it was, running down his cheek in a wavy line. The first drops drew breath from the crowd. I heard it in gasps, their voices sucked out like wind pulled through a tunnel. It mattered to them, his blood, because they'd never seen a centaur bleed. It mattered to me because I was made of that blood.

My father held a closed fist up to his eye, rubbed at the blood with his knuckle. The leaking smeared pink down his cheek. He was boxing a giant called Axio Nop Avanboa or Tall as the Avanboa Tree. Axio smiled when the blood came. My father reared on his hind legs to create distance and walked backward until he touched the shaking ring ropes.

I wasn't supposed to be at the fight. I wasn't supposed to know about it. But after my mother left us, my father would go away each night, tell me to stay inside and tend to my weaving, skin apples for drying, and turn over the fire. And I did

these things. For weeks. For months. And at some point I thought my mother would come back, that I was skinning fruits for her pies or weaving cloth for her to cut and shape and make into winter garments. But the only thing that came through the door was my sweaty and welted father, his coat often dusty, his tail full of swatchoo burs, stinging in his eyes. And after he'd take his shoes off, the four clanks they'd make, he'd come into my room and smooth my hair with his warm hands and settle onto his belly on the floor and wait, wait out the night.

My mother was human, like me, and my father would say nothing of her leaving, except that sometimes you have to learn things young. And sometimes mothers don't come home. And sometimes daughters follow their fathers out into the blue-haze light of the evening, between stone buildings and paths worn deep as dirt canals, because we just want to be let in. We just want to know.

And so my father took the beating. And all I could do was watch from the hill overlooking the small, open-air stadium. Watch as Axio circled and punched my father's crooked nose and big ears. And the more punches that came, the more the crowd pounded the floor with their feet, and when Axio missed they booed him, and when he didn't they roared against my father's teetering body.

When my father was backed against the ropes, Axio stepped closer. He dipped his body down and threw a punch under my father's chin. Each blow scattered blood drops from my father's face. I felt each one take away the tickling of his fingers, how he'd reach down from so high to cup my chin, tell me there was angel softness in my bones.

My father dropped to all fours and put his head down in a charge, pushed off the ropes and moved Axio back a few feet. He swung at Axio's body, but the blows were dodged or blocked. So my father raised on his hind legs, showing his length and beauty, and reached up and up with his punches, catching Axio on the chin a few times and on the forehead and temple. But there was so much strength in Axio. He took the shots and pushed my father away.

And my father stayed on the outside near the ropes, galloping around the ring, his tail swinging, his movements precise and evasive as if giving himself time to form a plan or disorient the giant.

When Axio grew tired of the galloping, he cut off my father midstride and punched him in the liver. It buckled my father, and his back legs shivered and went out. Axio stepped in with a blur of punches to his torso and head. And I recognized that my father was dying then, the blood coming from his nose and a yellow liquid from his ear. The crowd kept stomping and buzzing, the blur of fists swirling, my father staggering on those skinny front knees, shaken and beaten. So I stood up on my human legs and yelled down the hill, *Stop! Stop!* But through the distance and the fury and the noise, I was sure nothing could be heard. And so I breathed in all the wind I had, cupped my hands around my mouth, and yelled my father's name, *Tachao! Tachao!* And through the flurry of punches he looked up into the stands as if startled, my voice so much like my mother's, and he died this way on his knees in the dirt, his bloody mouth open, his eyes frantically searching the crowd, as he always must die, looking for her.

JONATHAN STARKE is a former boxer and nomadic traveler. His writing has appeared in the *Sun*, *Missouri Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *North American Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Gettysburg Review*, among others. His debut novel, *You've Got Something Coming*, received the Black Heron Press Award for Social Fiction.