

Jonathan Starke

SOME THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ME NOW

I turned to boxing after you left. You said no words would bring you back, that there was nothing I could do. So when the night is black as an oil spill, I hit the bags in an empty gym.

I sit on the edge of the ring and wind the wraps around my wrists, between my fingers, across my blood-dried knuckles to press the bones together. You probably know nothing about this pain that shoots through my wrist when I throw a left hook to the body, how it burns down like lightning, how I throw another and another, because one day I believe that pain will push you out of my memory.

I try not to think about those eight years together. Instead I count the blood drips on the canvas as I shadowbox and circle the ring, trying to think only in rhythms and beats and breaths, crosses and uppercuts, slips and weaves. But even with the counting and the motion, it's still hard, and maybe most nights I lay in the emptiness of bed without your lavender smell in the sheets, thinking of how I used to pick up your hair ties in the bathroom and stretch them between my fingers. And maybe I've kept the last voicemail you ever left and replay it in my mind as I forget about the dried blood on the floor and only hear that soft and distant voice that came through one last time, how it pitched up and down as if maybe you were walking then.

There's nothing easy about boxing—to step in and take shots and feel the bone and brain rattle, the body on body. And there's this delicate rhythm and soul that you don't put to words. You move to it. And sometimes when I'm clinched, when my opponent's got me by the back of the head, and we're breathing the same heavy air in the small space between us, I smell your breath. I feel the way you breathed into my back at night, how if I ever turned over, you'd have your mouth open and your arm up over your head, fingers balled in a fist, like being next to me all those years had become a burden you showed through your body.

When it's darker, later, I follow that rhythm with the jump rope, find it again between revolving hands and stopped floor. Skip, skip. Skip, skip. And without the skips I've got no way of moving, no motion to get around, to tuck, to protect. A boxer moves like this: step, slide, step, slide, like something inside him is always broken. But I refuse to be hit anymore, so I learn how to groove with the rope and the zombie steps and

these heavy gloves, which keep feeling lighter, like they're disappearing right off my hands.

This thing always happens on the speed bag. When I've got my rhythm, my breath, when I've exhausted combinations on the heavy bag. I throw two lefts, and two rights follow. It's automatic now, and my body just happens. Like I've forgotten everything else. When I sink into the motion, the speed bag speaks to me. Bop-a-dup, bop-a-dup, bop-a-dup, bop-a-dup. And I pray to lose you then. Because something about the swing of the bag makes me think of your square jaw and soft olive face and those children that will never be had and never be named and how there couldn't be another thing in life that hurts me more than losing that, and what I hear in return, my shoulders shaking and the wraps coming loose, is bop-a-dup, bop-a-dup, bop-a-dup, bop-a-dup.

And what I really want you to know is that you aren't always there, and at rare times you become a static between my fists and the bag, a moment between swift leather and fury, in which I am, mostly, at ease. And maybe I've only worked up to that moment here and there, after hundreds of hours and hundreds of days, but I will swing again and again and again until I can find that moment forever and you are released from me. But for now, for the man I'm capable of being, you remain an inerasable constant, a blur between the beats of the bag and the echo in this small room.