

My father holds my hand—taut in his grip, with my fingers outstretched, as he weaves a spool of meshed cotton in an elaborate pattern over my knuckles. The networks of small bones in my hands are held securely in place once he winds the final swathe around either wrist. He lifts me from his lap and presents the sheer facade of his fist, directing my attention to where he has tucked his thumb, beneath the row of towering phalanges, to illustrate the proper form that prevents that digit from dislocation or fracture behind the force of a jab.

I tighten my joints under the layers of wrap. He smiles. The hands of his first-born son transform with an ease that suggests destiny to him. I am almost four years old, and the bones in my hands know just where to fold.

It is 1992. I know more punch combinations than letters in the English alphabet. My mother presses the record button on a camcorder my father has borrowed. As per his orders, she captures a training session in our makeshift gym, the garage. My father loses patience and barks at my loose technique until I look back into the camera, a rind of tears glittering over each eye.

It is 1971. My five-year-old father is standing in the front pew of a Catholic cathedral. His younger brother asks him in Spanish if he wants to play hide-and-seek around their mother's casket at the base of the altar. My father wipes his eyes and refuses the game, preferring to remain alongside his father and four other siblings.

I am five years old now, and the head trainers in every boxing gym in Sacramento refuse to accept me because of my age. There is one kickboxing gym that will allow me to spar with other boys, so my father acquiesces. It helps that I am near the same size as most of the six- and seven-year-olds who already train there. My father spray-paints my headgear and chest protector a glossy black. I look like Santa Muerte. In the ring, my fist creases the black leather that encases it and rouses a burst of stardust from the body of my seven-year-old opponent. His muscles relax as he plummets

through space. There is an echo as his spinal column slaps the canvas, shaking atoms free from his body.

It is the early seventies, and my grandfather occupies his mind by working overtime in an abattoir. He drills one-inch bits into the skulls of livestock, leaving a queue of collapsed muscle and bone to be harvested in his wake. He is an immigrant with a third grade education; now he is also a single father. There is often knocking at the door as Child Services visits regularly to interview my father and aunt and uncles. My grandfather sporadically interrupts the interviews in his kitchen by turning his head from televised boxing matches and exclaiming to the household that his children will never be taken from him. It is a fight he will not lose. At work he eats whiskey on his lunch breaks and at home he hires a babysitter from his hometown of Jalostotitlán. The agents who are knocking on the door want to separate the motherless brood, so he eventually decides to marry the babysitter. Once paperwork shows that my grandfather has a legal wife and his children a new mother, the constant knocking at the door becomes infrequent until it disappears.

It is 1988 now, and my father extends his hand toward me for the first time in a delivery room in Mercy General Hospital. I clutch his bony finger, making a fist around it. He thinks he can finally construct the family that the universe robbed him of seventeen years ago when his mother's heart grew too large for her chest—inflammation, they called it. He asks my mother if they can name me Ricardo Junior. They bicker until she is allowed to write "Alexander" on my birth certificate as they had originally planned.

It is 1998 and my father is growing impatient with my mother. She is raising his children and living her life day to day, as she sees fit, and not according to some idyllic script he seems to have written in his head. Often, when she performs some trivial action, he feels impelled to comment that his dead mother never did it that way.

I am six years old now, and the Sacramento Police Athletic League in Oak Park will accept me as a fighter. My interest as a practitioner of the sport is waning. Five years from now, I will become a professional wrestling fanatic, like many other boys my age. For the brunt of my time at PAL, I train solely on inertia, like a lost planet drifting along an orbital path blazed by my father.

Several years before I first step into my second training facility, my father cooks dinner for my brother and me because my mother is in the hospital, readying to give birth to another one of my siblings. He serves us kidney and stipulates that our plates must be clean before we will be allowed to leave the table. I gag on the chunk of livestock viscera he is forcing down my throat. After an hour or so of disciplined perseverance, I manage to keep it all down.

It is 2002 now, and my parents have arranged my five siblings and me on the sofa in our living room. My father sobs for the first time since the seventies and hugs me goodbye. He says I am the man of the house now. In 1992, my welled tears spill over and I finally manage to correctly launch the punch combination into his waiting mitts. The force of my blows tip him backward, and my mother cheers me from behind the camcorder.

Now my father stands in my bedroom in 2000 and studies the posters of the The Undertaker and El Hijo del Santo on the walls. He sighs deliberately before asking me if I wouldn't prefer to tack up some posters of the current welterweight and middleweight boxing champions.

It's Thanksgiving 2002, and the woman he left my mother to live with serves me a plate in Vacaville, California. The turkey meat is cold on the bone, but I don't want to be rude, so I force it down. It doesn't take me long.

I am fifteen years old, and I decline an invitation to spend the weekend in Vacaville watching the Shane Mosley-Oscar De La Hoya rematch. I can't stand to see the photographs on the walls of the home my father shares with the woman who served

me on Thanksgiving. Within the picture frames, they are smiling together in Mexico, smiling together at a cocktail party, smiling together while my family sleeps and eats and fights together in Sacramento. I decide to tell my father that I'd rather not watch the boxing match. I lie and say it doesn't interest me anymore. He does not to speak to me for the next three months.

It is 2007. I enroll in a boxing class at Sacramento City College and tell no one. I respect the sport as I always have. It is not a game; no one plays boxing. The concept is ancient: man has always had two fists and a reason to fight. There is a primal artistry inherent in pugilism that is absent in most other sports. Sugar Ray Robinson famously likened the craft to geometry. I call it a ballet of blood.

The padding in modern gloves is pre-molded, creating eternal fists. The leather thumb is locked and properly situated for you. My new Everlasts are the most arresting vermillion I have ever seen; I think I feel my irises expand to absorb them. I wrap my hands with an elaborate pattern of my own design. Even beneath the advanced technology, the bones in my hands snatch the breath from the lungs of one of my classmates. I smile because the sport proves consistent across time and shows poise in retaining its purity in the face of advents that only alter it superficially. It is beautiful.

The class may be taken twice for credit, so I enroll in the fall, too. My cousin signs up for the same class. Coincidentally, he is my father's godson, and at some point in the semester he tells his godfather that he and I have been training alongside each other. My father borrows a camcorder from a friend and tells me he wants to drive me to my final examination. The final in boxing is you fight. As we leave my mother's house to drive to Hughes Stadium together, my mother ignores my goodbye. In the car, my father comments that she is upset that I am sharing this with him and not her. I tell him that I did not invite him. I know that my mother does not like to watch her son fight. This is not about boxing, like it should be; my father has found a way to make it about my relationships with my parents. I control my anger—the way the discipline of

the ring has taught me to. My father has just disrespected my sport. He is trying to make something ugly out of something I know is beautiful. This should only be about boxing. He must not love it like I do. So I tell my father that he invited himself. I am not sharing this with him. It is all mine.

My opponent for my final exam was also enrolled in the boxing class the previous semester. I remember someone calling him The Fighter of Spring. His class was held on different days than mine then, and the same is true of the fall. I saw enough of his fights to understand that he is worthy of my respect but not my trepidation. Our instructor tells me weeks before he matches everyone else for finals that he is considering throwing me in with him, as if to give me fair warning. It is true that my opponent has been impressive in the ring, but he is dependent on his physical gifts. He is a naturally talented athlete, but I do not consider him a well-schooled boxer. He is rhythmic and fast—a well-placed jab can change that. Still, there are many people gathered to watch our showdown, and most of them are there to watch him perform.

My father lifts his camcorder and crunches for position with the rest of the spectators on the stadium track. Before I leave his side, he tells me to “Crack this guy’s fuckin’ head open.” The bell rings and I draw a virtual grid over my opponent in my mind. I follow the lines and unload a combination over them. At the opening of the first round, I throw punches at a faster rate than seconds can elapse. Time cannot keep up with me and neither can my opponent. My defense is a black hole that eats his athleticism and rhythm. I knock the contact lenses loose from the shallow fluid in his eyes. I make the sport beautiful again.

I am almost twenty years old now and my father and I have our last conversation in front of my two-year-old half-brother. I have been the man of my house for the better half of a decade. My father reasons that he would never speak to his own father the way I see fit to speak to him, and I reason that my grandfather would never demand

from his children the fawning respect that my father believes he is entitled to. He tells my half-brother it's time to leave.

It is 2010, and my father has begun taking my mother's youngest son, aged ten, to a boxing gym. My brother loves the sport in a way that took me almost twenty years to develop. In his first year of practice in the ring, he seizes teeth from one of his preadolescent opponents. I have never seen him spar, but I have exercised with him—twice.

I am twenty-five years old now. My skeleton has matured into the monolithic template set by my father's redoubtable body. My mother says I look like him at certain unfortunate angles. If I ever have a child of my own, the first thing I will do once he or she can stand is adjust his or her feet into an orthodox boxer's stance. Then I will teach him or her the proper placement of the thumb when making a fist. And I will leave him or her with my knowledge of the basic one-two-three combination.

Then I will walk into my garage, my makeshift gym, alone. I will unfurl one pair of my 180" handwraps across the concrete and draw a cloth scaffolding around the bones in my hands. Black sixteen-ounce gloves will slide over my hands and morph them into fists. And when I throw my fists, the bones in my hands will fold with an unconscious precision, just as they always have and always will, and ride through space like dark comets destined for impact.