

Hulk Hogan Comes to Tuscaloosa

Brian Oliu

(after J. McCall)

And it's really him; at least that's what the children say, that the sky turned red and yellow before it grew black: white thunderbolts across the sky like an interruption, a whistle on the wind that doesn't know any better. The kids would say this, of course, despite being told to stay away from windows—it is hard to make out primary colors with a mattress over your head in the center of a dark hallway. It's hard to blame them for these things: the safest place for a tornado is not outside of the ring but in the heart of your house—the reciting of passages from younger days & hypothetical disasters that I would never need: bombs can be stopped by the hard lacquer of school desks, a funnel will only lap at my shirt if I lay facedown in a divot, alligators confused by the zigzagging of slow, scared feet.

He came to town & ran wild: a chainsaw in every hand, broken glass in every big boot. I can still tell you where everything once was; a time when everything was laid out in front of us like it was supposed to be there: nothing new ever comes through this town—the trains whistle before smashing into turnstiles, the bounce back stagger of a few too many beers at a place we know without saying its name.

I am lucky in that I learn tricks quickly: the human body does not work that way—that there is no way to ignore whatever pain has been inflicted upon it; a leg trapped in a steel chair can bear the weight of two men, a cutting crash can be brushed aside with the shaking of fists & the clenching of a jaw. The trick here is that my house is old: carpeting you could lose a string of pearls in, a stove that rattles when the coils glow red. The showerhead spits water against windows: whatever light is left in the sky glows through. Whatever you have heard about bathtubs & tornadoes is conditional when you are reminded that wind can peel shingles off of a rooftop like cotton can be split in half by the fistful. Here, underneath is me, not you: I do not shimmer, my skin is not the color of the sun, I do not have anything to be envious of except a soft heart & an iron will to make it out alive if the situation called for it—that no one kicks out from this, that there is no chance of me going over the storm, my body on the swirling wind until it is choked out into nothing—that perhaps if I spin fast enough, arms out, I could dissipate all of this into stillness; that where I stand is where I stand, & we will all be safe: we will continue birthdays as they were meant to be, blankets laid out on the dying grass of April as we celebrate, leaving nothing but bottlecaps & bones. That one year later, you couldn't find me on a red stool where I always sit, waiting until the clock struck something familiar—that there was nothing for us to do to celebrate except something that resembled tradition; a song on the speakers rooted in nonsense.

Instead, I remain still. Body curled up, anticipating a blow that I know I cannot get up from: I cannot be kicked in the face if I just stay down—the script cannot run its course, there is nothing to do but drag me into the spiral.

Before the surreal led to something more, you could never find me in a bathtub: my shoulders squeaking up against the sides like nothing special: there is no room for sex here, there is no room for tinsel town & twinkle toes: no Hollywood, just the sound of something

atomic. Before the rehearsing of roles, let me tell you a story about this room—a girl playing a bit-part ripped the curtain from its rings: it crashed into the water like the pillars of something much more majestic than what will & has happened here: a small town turned nuclear, a map revealing a dark diagonal scar down through parts of the city we never went to—that the rage here was wasted on something so unimportant: that the true tragedy would be in a city that she shouted the name of every time this town felt too real.

When the hulking swirl came through, it did not deviate: later, people will ask me if a monster came that day and I am uncertain. The monsters of the city where I was born come in different forms: a mouth that spits green mist, a man waving the flag of a place I fear. I would like to tell you that I have stopped believing in monsters the same way that I have stopped believing in heroes: that every soft-closed fist hits a forehead & opens up like a magnolia. Yet they are there with every thought of something sour, how when I try to tell you the best I ever felt was after bodies were found face up in lawns they had never been in, how plate-glass windows shattered to pebbles, how all I wanted was for someone to lick the gasoline from my fingers. How we have been broken & you treated it like an honor: to say that you had been almost killed by the greatest trick ever pulled & that you can live to remember it.

This is all to say that I have been saying my prayers: that instead of counting all of the dangers that we could miss, I am living to remember—that I am cursed on nights when the wind picks up and the sky turns yellow, that I refuse to be taught what it means to be wild. There is nothing left to be said of bathtubs, of mattresses. This reckoning will never be called brother.

