

Josie Bednar

The Fight in the Dog

I

It's 1994.

My mother is alone in a shack by the river
manning a life jacket stand. The morning is quiet:
nobody's out yet, not even the tourists.
Stuck to the sunbleached hut is a flier
reading "MOPAC RAPIST-- TIPS WANTED"
and the phone number of a task force,
or some true crime fanatic with a radio show.

A man creeps into the cabana,
arms outstretched like a cartoon mummy, and jumps.
I bet by now you think you know where this is going.
In the second before she sees him, her hands reach
for one of the canoe paddles for rent.
She holds it as a bo staff, or a baseball bat,
whichever you think is fiercer. And she screams
like she'll never scream again, a scream like a movie montage
which efficiently condenses her 70 years left of life
into two seconds, lost to the humid air forever.

He says *sorry. Thought you were Cheri. Thought you were-- someone else. Sorry.*
She says *I thought you were a f*cking killer.*

II

He says *sorry. Thought you were Cheri. Thought you were-- someone else. Sorry.*
She says *I don't think Cheri would have liked that either.*

The campers had been antsy all day, but quiet as she tells the story.
At the end, they laugh carefully, like they're not sure they have permission.
They're laughing at him and his stupidity,
as though it's evident to every man when and when not to terrify.

Sitting there on the dojo floor I feel older, not just the decade
I have on these campers, but the inside knowledge kept to those
who have heard the small truth the world sometimes shows us.
I sat there holding the breath I couldn't let out:
we are never safe, and never were.

Half of the little girls waiting criss cross for snack time that day
will be assaulted. The other half will hear about it,
and remember.

III

Last summer at training they paid for a guy to dress up
in padded armor, so we could really hit him. I froze when it was my turn.
It's too much, I told them. I was fourteen.
I didn't know when men would hurt me they'd do it so close up.

I was thankful afterward for the gallons of water stored in the dark grass
that made my bed outside the cafe. I closed my eyes and sank
underground in sleep, softly protected and while little so heavy
I left a chalk outline in the lawn. My mother waited on a bench behind me,
knowing in her way what I was building and how to let me do it.

In the moment it was clear that what I lacked wasn't training,
or some radical form of expertise you unlock after ten thousand hours,
but resolve, or at least that certain fear that tells each rabbit when to run.
It took a nine mile drive from that grass to find nature

and I, watching the rolling field of cattails and lily pads before me,
felt safer and still unhelpfully afraid. Later, I would run the whetstone
of my fear over and over myself, wishing for an imposing body.
It didn't work. Nothing would.

IV

It didn't take long after that summer to realize I was as big

as I was ever going to get, that the four inches on my mother
was the most I would ever have, and that it would be a while yet
until I gave up hoping otherwise.

Too soon for comfort will I be without her small body
to hide myself behind, the warmth of protection,
of home, of the long summer spanning these first years.
Only, when it's over, I'll be ready.