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Crocodile's Pudding

Coach told me that the first time he wrestled a crocodile, he wept. Sobbed as he clung to the muddy, scaly armor, inhaling steamy rotten breath from her nostrils.

I envy the crocodile's four chambered heart. It has an extra valve; a cog snaps into action after a kill, allowing the right aortic arch to shut off completely. The left aortic arch redirects the flow of blood to her stomach, bypassing the lungs. This surge of CO₂-enriched blood increases her stomach's acidity threshold.

She has the highest blood acidity level of any living vertebrate, but a crocodile needs more acid to digest bones and gristle. She swallows her food whole.

You have to wrap your hands in gauze and tape before a fight to keep the smaller bones from breaking.

It's an intimate ritual for fighters. You surrender your most valued weapon to your coach. You sit facing one another and as you quietly breathe the same air together, layers of gauze held in place by athletic tape are wound around the wrist, twined between the fingers. Amor in crisscrossed x's.

A hard lump of calcium sits underneath my right pointer finger, nearer to wrist than knuckle, from a fight in 2008. I had a new Coach. *My Coach*. Who, when no one was looking, stroked my hair and kissed me in the sacred space before the fight.

During that fight, my hand slipped from my glove and my fingers got caught. The wraps stayed in place but my sense of self-preservation did not. No longer able to make a fist, I switched from punching to slamming my opponent with the back of my hand.

When the ref tried to raise my hand at the end of the fight and declare me the winner, I yanked it back in pain.

The residual calcium lump sits now as an extra knuckle above my wrist, bisected by a protruding blue-green vein. When the weather gets cold, the years I spent punching and trying to hold on to other people makes my hands throb. I press the lump for comfort, sometimes trying to mash it flat, sometimes just rubbing the vein back and forth, as if to resolve one with the other.

My hands always bled during fights, the gauze turning rusty with dried blood from the pressure of skin around knuckles chafing against constraint, Knobby bones trying to carve their way free.

Thin skin.

I worked hard to become the ideal mistress for Coach. You convince yourself into belief as a fighter—self-deception insinuates itself into the deeper, uncertain terrains.

But once I saw an elderly woman sitting at a table alone.

I can't remember the color of her hair. What I remember is that she was sitting in a booth across the aisle, alone, with two dishes of chocolate pudding.

I remember a softness; a body allowed cushion and curves.

A soft body alone. With two dishes of pudding.

As I watched her carefully spoon chocolate pudding from a curved glass dish into her mouth, I remember how a sharp pang tighten my diaphragm, and panic gripped my throat.

When she finished the first dish, she placed it down and picked up the second dish of pudding and I felt my eyes begin fill.

She ate it with just as much stillness, just as much deliberation.

That's when I began to unravel.

I began to have the nightmares where I am screaming at Coach to *hear me hear me*.

I'm terrified I'll become the pudding lady.

Resigned. Alone.

Afraid I'll eat a second dessert with deliberate, little bites.

Because there will be no one else to eat with me.

Because I've forgotten that I can swallow a thing whole; that I know the right way to wrestle something, to grip and keep fighting. Afraid I've lost the ability to find a way to keep hitting.

When he spoke of wresting the crocodile, Coach cast her as both evolutionary marvel and successful conquest. She survived the asteroids. She was proof of his mastery over anything he wants, even dinosaurs.

But myself I love the crocodile because of her osteoderm armor and the acid in her heart. Because she can swallow bones.