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Bruised

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An elbow blade in my vision like the one true thing, then — a bright crackling, the wheeling world.

I wander off the basketball court, the pain rising and crinkling into stars. There are bits of garbled conversation, my own heaving breath. No blood that I can feel — but space, I need space, to be away from other bodies, to be alone in my own blood-heavy, throbbing body.

Slowly I take my hand away from my left eye, and every-

thing — the court, the nine other men, their sweat pants and mesh shorts and reversible jerseys — slides, with a sick, liquid jerk, back into place.

I see now, blurrily, the tall man whose elbow has just connected with my upper cheekbone. He's standing two or three steps away, hands laced over his head, staring at me with an astonished, gee-whiz grin, which he is trying without success to twist down into a frown. He has caused this sudden, startling

violence. Or, more accurately, we have caused it together: he driving with the ball past one defender, then another — graceful the whole time, tall and lean and powerful, one of those blessed beings whose flesh and bones are their true home, his arm and the ball a sinuous river of skin and orange leather — and I pulling my stubborn feet into position, planting myself like a fence post between him and the basket, with no particular grace to speak of but perhaps a kind of foolish, straight-up-and-down dignity. And he flew, as his kind do, sort of sitting in the air, as if riding some invisible seat up, up to the rim, the ball leaving his long fingers and rolling lightly over the iron when, with a wet crack, his falling elbow struck my upturned face, his bent knee thumped my sternum, and we tumbled to the floor.

He was up quickly — I could hear him step away and ask if his shot had dropped — and then I got up, too, but slowly, humped over and stumbling around the damp, badly lit corner of the YMCA gym, my hands cupped over the left side of my face. Which is what I'm still doing. Which means everyone now has to stand around and blow air and scuff their shoes and wait to see if I am all right, which means the young man who struck me has to step over and put his hand on my back and say, "Hey, man, you OK? That was some fucking wreck. Here. Let me take a look."

He leans down and tips my chin up and studies my face. He touches my temple — lightly, very lightly — and whistles. "You'll have a hell of a bruise, but you'll be all right." He straightens and starts back to the court. "And nice fucking play, man. I had to change my shot. Almost didn't get that one in."

And so, with that, I am obliged to finish the game, and to play the next game as well, because I have been pronounced fine. Bruised but fine. And it was a nice fucking play. And they need a tenth man. As we jog again up and down the court, the others grin and kid about not driving in on the "Professor" — which is what this group of linemen, lawn guys, farmhands, short-order cooks, sales associates, construction-site managers, and bus drivers call me — because "he'll wreck you." I grin obligingly back, each step shaking the crushed tissues of my face, jostling the bones those tissues were crushed against (maxilla, I remember from some long-ago anatomy class), bones I am suddenly achingly aware of, bones whose hollow, winging architecture I can feel now in intricate detail beneath the blood-soaked meat and hot skin of my face.

And with each step and sideways slide, my left cheek swells up and out, and my left eye becomes a slit and, finally, shuts.

The laptop screen begins to swim.

I have been working too long, for one, but blood and various serums have been rising as well into the space around my left eye, have pooled in the north maxillary region, distending further the orbicularis oculi muscle, and my left field of vision — after a few initial rounds of careful ice application — has again thinned to a sharp crescent.

I shut my laptop (with which I looked up all these various bones and muscles and the etymology of the word *bruise* and whatever else I could think of relating to my aching face, the

singular fact of my life this lonely night) and wander into the kitchen. My wife has left for her book club. My one-year-old son is asleep. I grab a bag of peas from the freezer and a can of Pabst from the fridge, drape the peas over my face and pop the top on the beer and take a long drink. I clomp down the basement stairs and turn on the opening rounds of the Big East basketball tournament, Rutgers suddenly coming after favored Cincinnati.

By halftime the peas have thawed and smell green and weedy. I pull the dripping sack away from my face and feel — what is it that I feel? Tough isn't quite it, or isn't all of it, though I'll admit I do feel tougher this Tuesday evening than I do most Tuesday evenings. And it's more than just watching the young hotshot forward from Cincinnati make some of the same mistakes I did out on the court today, more than just the guys calling me the "Wrecker" instead of the Professor. It has to do, I think, with being nothing but a body, with the raw reality and ache of this particular body.

It has to do as well with how I peer this evening out of my squinched eye at a world similarly squinched and distended; how whenever I breathe, the contours of my swollen face reify themselves in my mind. To dull the pain, I focus on something outside of me: the broken-backed couch we bought for twenty-five dollars at a garage sale, the old braided rug, the dusty television screen, the tumbling stack of videotapes, the ragged line of empty beer cans. I am someone who lives a good portion of his life in his head, someone for whom the force of an idea can be as powerful as the rush of a winter gale or the startling *thwack* of an accidental elbow. Yet this night whatever ideas I have must wait in line, must sit tight.

This night I am here: in this bruised self, in this bruised world.

The odds are against us. The death rate is, of course, an irrefutable 100 percent — let's get that out of the way — and though the chances of this or that awful thing happening to any one of us are thankfully low (save cancers and car accidents, which are more or less assured), they do happen. We have the stories and scars. We are so awfully unlucky, so awfully lucky.

I grew up on a hay-and-sheep ranch out on the Big Dry of eastern Montana, a place of long, rainless summers and calamitously cold winters, a place where the body was what mattered, where the physical world was reckoned with daily. We'd come in from an afternoon spent fixing fences, bucking bales, or trailing cattle, and everyone would wash up and drink a glass of iced tea or beer before dinner and compare barbed-wire bites and barked knees and smashed fingers. We'd brag of the tons of hay we'd hauled, the bulls we'd whipped and driven over the ridge, the mangy coyote we'd shot cleanly through the head. We had survived another day in this meanest of places and were proud of the work we'd done — as long as the work's toll leaned against us like a hard wind but did not blow us down. (I think here of the confused boys I knew who were thrown by some wild horse and used a wheelchair ever after, or the rage of old men, backs clacking like dominoes, no longer able to wield a shovel.) We were proud of our

bruises and wounds; they testified not to our strength but to our continuance, for out on those far plains it was survival itself that was sacrosanct.

I remember as well other moments, more luckless than toughening, when the world didn't wear at us but up and bit us — though here, too, survival is what makes all the stories matter. Say, the day I broke my arm as a boy: balancing one moment atop the gray wooden fence that circled our farmhouse, then falling. I hit the ground, the air went out of me, and I looked up at the cornflower-blue sky and my little brother's sun-haloed head, the pain just beginning to make its nervy jail-break. I did not realize the severity of the situation until my brother began to cry and pointed at my impossibly kinked arm. Or, a few years later, roller-skating with my cousin Molly at our grandparents' house, I turned a corner too fast and tripped over a seam in the sidewalk. This time there was a moment or two of pure black before I picked myself up slowly and put my hand to my forehead, which was warm and wet. I blinked, and the world was suddenly washed with blood, the sun a wound, the far hills streaming red creeks, Molly's long hair a crimson shawl.

And I remember standing in the dirt swath of the discus range during my first year of high-school track and field. I was "shagging" for the big-armed varsity thrower: watching the spinning discus *thwump* to the earth, then trotting over to it and rolling it back to the throwing pad. Someone called my name, and in the second it took for me to turn, everything heaved and buckled, as if an earthquake had opened a great, yawning chasm at my feet, shaking and breaking the plains. I stumbled, tried to stay upright, gouts and runnels of some liquid pouring off my head, dripping from my cheeks and chin. I could taste the sticky salt of it but couldn't imagine what it was.

Later, treating me for shock, the first responder kept asking me what had happened, and I kept asking back, *Yeah, what happened?* It wasn't until the next day that I understood: I had been hit in the head, at a distance of some two hundred yards, by a four-pound, metal-rimmed discus. It took me a week to wash all the dried blood out of my hair — at least, what bits of hair the doctor hadn't shaved off. When I finally came back to school, they let me wear a hat to cover the wound, and at the end of the season the track coach gave me the Iron Man Award, which pleased me mightily. Really, what matter that it was happenstance? I'd survived: that was what counted. In front of the new kid or some group of girls, curls and waves and ringlets in their eyes, I could push back my hair and let them run their fingers over the five-inch scar along my scalp. It was a story I came to tell often, something I could rely on. I felt singled out, chosen by the dry plains wind that day.

I remember very little from the emergency room, but there is this one moment: Swimming up and out of some lake of painkillers, I see the doctor's white coat and my mother's denim purse. They are bent over me, looking at me. No, they are looking at the skull-deep wound on my head. *This one*, the doctor is saying, and I can see his thick lips, his stubbled chin, his blunt finger jabbing at the aching district above my forehead. *This one right here. If this artery had busted, he wouldn't have*

made it. His heart would have pumped him dry in a minute. This is one lucky kid you've got here.

I wake in the dark, the throb and sharp ache of my face waking with me.

I have heard my son stirring, but he hasn't cried yet. I sit up, and screws of pain twist into my cheek and grab at the bonehouse of my eye. I swing my feet off the bed and am still a moment, breathing through the worst of it. Finally I can stand and wander through the dark into the bathroom.

In the mirror I study myself: A sharp black arc beneath my left eye fades into various plums and blue-greens and grays — a leathery demon wing, I think, lifting from beneath my skin.

Bright red vessels spider the eyeball itself. My cheek and temple are drum tight and twice their normal size, the swelling so pronounced it has drawn my whole face close around this pain, the left half of my mouth pulled up in a permanent sneer — quick wink of eyetooth in the mirror.

I turn my face this way and that, the blacks and blues and greens and reds glistening in the shifting light. I look hard and mean, I think, and I feel sort of hard and mean, feel like letting my hair fall in lank, greasy tufts and driving too fast down to the gas station on the highway, Alice in Chains or the Stones or maybe even Kid Rock on the radio, and buying a pack of Camels. I grin at the thought, and in the mirror my smile looks more like a jagged wound, like I'm chewing glass and gravel. It's a good thing it's spring break. I don't have to see colleagues and students for another week yet. In a few weeks this bruise will pale, and I'll be back in the classroom, back on the court. I will survive this.

Survive, from the Latin *super* (over) and *vivere* (to live). To live over. Even when the muscles have reknitted and the livid contusion has faded, this bruising will not be gone. I will live over it. It will always be there beneath me, buoying me.

My son, Walter, cries. I set my glasses gingerly on my nose and go to him.

Over his red-faced protestations, I strap Walter into his backpack and swing him up onto my shoulders. (As I slide my arms through the straps, some part of his weight settles along the tender, bony ridges of my aching face.) At just under a year, my son has yet to make even a halting peace with the cruel mechanics of cause and effect. Though I sympathize, I can do nothing about it; long ago some god twinned joy and injury, and so the ritual of clicked buckles and yanked straps, which Walter loathes, inevitably leads to that which he loves: a hike to the prairie park.

(end of excerpt)