

Ground Fighting/Venita Blackburn

Esperanza and some of my old softball team were at the taco shack, so I gave them a head nod. They did the same. The fries and tacos are made to order, so it takes for-goddamn-ever. Except for the one time Esperanza came to visit me in the hospital, we weren't ever really friends. Poly High in Long Beach looked like a commercial for a PG-13 teen dramedy full of colorful faces and the balmy scent of coastal California: special episodes for the homeless epidemic, rampant STDs, minor race wars and socioeconomic inequality.

Esperanza liked to be weird and mysterious. She was into Care Bears, alien conspiracies, and watching men online sting themselves with the world's most toxic insects, . She had heavy black hair, wore v-neck T-shirts unraveling at the hems. Her eyes fell too deeply in her skull, so she always looked skeletal in photographs. Still, a v-neck is the opposite of secrecy, so I thought I knew everything.

I'm not sure if it's obvious, but I'm not that into people. A person is fine. Sometimes a person is fine, but people are a problem. They're loud and have a lot to say that usually doesn't add up, and it's confusing. Then I realize they're confused and to explain it all would be a lot of energy best left for anything else.

Nothing but juniors and sophomores crowded the taco stand. The girls feigned interest in the boys' conversations about people with unique abilities, how some humans haven't evolved and still have prehistoric tendons that allow them to climb better than others. I knew the stories the girls would tell later when the boys were gone, whose dick had skin tags, how one girl's boyfriend always fingered her til she bled, or how to get Vicodin for really bad cramps or just how to get Vicodin. The girls usually pretended to listen but found this particular conversation interesting enough to begin checking out each others' hands. I found a good spot to stand alone and wait for my order and look at anything but them: the gum streaks on the concrete like acne scars, lots of shoes, the sparrows ticking their heads to get a view of fallen scraps one eye at a time. All the voices and conversation began to muffle into chirps no different than birds organizing their day from the tops of trees. Esperanza has a picture of a red-haired white woman on a key chain swinging from her backpack. The woman looks severe but knowing and wears a black blazer. I assumed she must be a singer from some blazer wearing Swedish pop band. I started to imagine Esperanza dancing to weird accents and Irish crooning in her bedroom among all the hip-hop and mariachi that thrums in our neighborhood and smiled to myself like an idiot.

“You think that's funny?”

A random boy appeared in front of me and repeated the question. I recognized him. He played junior varsity basketball and baseball. I was only a sophomore but still played varsity...when I did play. I asked what was happening because I sincerely wasn't paying attention. Then Esperanza grabbed my wrist and pulled it to her face.

"She's the one!" she yelled.

My former teammates cheered and started clearing off a table. The boy sat down on one side, and put his arm up for a wrestling match.

"Me?"

She whispered, "You can beat that fool without trying."

Another of the boys eyed my wrists and hands then my whole body.

"I don't know man," he said, "she looks like she could kick a door down."

Esperanza cursed and ushered me to the seat. I mentioned that I just wanted my fries and no one listened. I didn't bother mentioning I was grieving a lost parent. If they didn't care about food, they wouldn't care about that. My father believed in sports the way he believed in the weather; they guided our days, and we adjusted our whole lives to the games. Without him, I lost my faith in balls and sticks.

JV boy's hand looked relatively clean, but I still didn't care to touch it let alone hold it tightly for several seconds or more. I looked up at Esperanza. She was nearly taller than everybody, even the teachers. I wanted to give her my pocket change and take her places and erase all the other heads, even the ladies making the orders in the tiny hot kitchen behind the counter. I wondered if love begins that way, hoping to erase other people's bodies.

I grabbed JV boy's palm and held it tight.

"First, we test the grip," he said.

I felt him try to move my hand back by the wrist, so I tightened instinctively in resistance. His own hand moved easily with some pressure, so I rotated the whole thing til his knuckles faced my chin.

"Oh shit," he said.

Someone counted to three. The match engaged. He dug his jagged nails into my skin and shook the table a little. My bare elbow on the wood felt grated and stung. Pain, to me, is a

portal, an access point to another world, the smallest of places and those infinite in scale. When I buried my father, I went to the stars. It's the greatest high when your own body is so wrecked you get to leave it for a while.

With his hand in that position he had no chance to win. All I had to do was endure the pinch, the pressure, the sting then pull his arm a little further out and it was over. I won. The screaming was incredible. The boys, the girls, the little ladies in the kitchen giggled like something extraordinary had happened.

"She swoll. She swoll!" The boys chanted.

"Fucking man is what she is," JV lamented and demanded a rematch.

At that last declaration I felt a different kind of pain, familiar and wicked. I ignored the suggestion that something about my body was not quite right. Then there was a hot and sexy bag of fries on the counter with my number on it. I took it and walked away. The skies in southern California are beautiful in the early evening. The smog ignites in gold and fuchsia. I wasn't diagnosed as intersex until twelve, more female than male so before that "girl" was just a good guess. After a few paces I felt I wasn't alone. Then I wasn't alone. Esperanza followed me. We said "hey" one after the other.

It was quiet for a while but not a bad kind. She apologized for making me arm wrestle, but I told her it was fun. She was surprised I wasn't hurt by what JV said. There was more of that good quiet. I offered her some fries, meaning my heart, my blood, my future. She declined, said she had already eaten.

I asked, "Who is that lady on your backpack?"

"What?"

"On the keychain?"

"Skully?!"

I had no clue, but turns out the woman was not a Europop superstar but instead an actress named Gillian Anderson, star of *The X-Files*. All of which I knew nothing about and all of which Esperanza was now determined to explain in full. I liked listening to her talk, her head above me framed in the pink clouds.

When I first met Esperanza a year ago as freshmen, we were gathering on the softball field for the first practice. The other girls laughed, tossed balls at each other or scrunched their eyes

into the sun for the pain of it. Esperanza walked over to me with an agenda. She looked like she was going to give me a hug or punch me in the mouth.

Whatever it was would be too much, and I lost my breath. Instead she just pivoted on her heel and stood next to me not saying anything at all. The movement of her chest reminded me that I needed to breathe, so I did and thankfully avoided passing out like a dumbass. Before she came over, I didn't realize how scary it was to be there with those strange girls and the ribbons in their hair to match the uniform colors. There were rules exercised in between the game that I barely knew yet: how to pay attention but not stare, how to walk like them and love their walk, how to recognize the pack, be strong but not too strong, be satisfied with stepping aside for boys, how disappointment would be a condition of life, how being a girl can take the air out of our lungs before we have a chance to protest. But with Esperanza suddenly and fiercely at my side for no other reason than it seemed right, I felt claimed. I felt happy.

After the arm wrestling, Esperanza asked if she could come over to my house. Before my dad died, that was normal. He hosted parties for the team. They loved him way more than me. I wanted to tell her that my house wasn't the same house now but looked up into the shadows of her eyes and got lost in a stuttering yes.

It was still early in the evening and my house was empty. It was a two bedroom off Pine with no parking. Esperanza flopped on the couch like it was hers, and I couldn't help but smile. It had been hard to recognize my house since the funeral and now more so with Esperanza's whole body in it. It was a nice room, a faux suede sectional with warm sunlight and a checkered rug. Happy people could've lived there. I sat on the edge beside her then sank a little deeper then back to the edge again. Esperanza laughed.

"You're so girly," she said. "Let me see your laptop."

I obeyed. Then we started talking about nipples, and I was less nervous. We had for real nipple talk, the whole science of it after some online videos' algorithm diverted us too far in one direction. Or we did it to ourselves. After committing twenty-seven minutes to amateur porn, we had vast theories. Tiny nipples always indicate confidence, imminent success, conqueror of huge cocks, summoner of orgasms, with total disregard for the pleasure of anyone but herself. The big tits are shy at first then wildly dominant to the point of alarm. Still, all of it can change depending on the direction they point. There is no argument against nipples and fate.

I remembered a party at my house with the team. No parents, no rules, just thin walls between us and the next townhouse, so everybody kept it reasonable. We were athletes and really good and had practice in the morning, so no one got that high. Instead, we watched porn. Porn with softball players is like watching a horror movie or a documentary. Most of them looked at it

like an instruction manual; the rest of us were mortified at the human species as a whole. We sought out the most absurd videos that had the best user approval rating, but ultimately no matter the context of the video eventually a penis of substantial girth went into a neat and pulsing vagina. I knew that experience would never be me, how my own body seemed too far away from the veiny dicks or carefully folded labia. The moment before the sex when the pair still talked, still had a way in or out and still considered their future I felt an almost arousal, my underwear sliding against me, my body wakening real and firm as a knuckle. Then it went away. The videos clicked on and on from hairy to waxed to messy in a controlled way then not a controlled way to artificial sound effects of liquid sloshing to a total absence of faces and wrists and knees, leaving nothing but sections of bodies carved out for the thrum of feeling they provide without the troubling business of life before or after that singular moment. I felt sorry for everyone involved.

Now alone together, Esperanza simply declared that I was into tits and asked me for something to drink. I got her sparkling water.

“Why don’t you like your house?” she asked like a therapist being paid by the hour. I got warm and felt like too much of me had been seen without my permission as if the truth of my whole life stuffed down deep had been squirming around on the floor this whole time. I told her I don’t like being at home anymore. That wasn’t good enough, so I told her more.

“I came out to my mom, and she looked at me, looked at my forehead really, looked hard like it was either missing or communicating better than my own voice. Then she looked up even higher and told me to wash my hair. That’s all.”

Esperanza drank from her can and swallowed with difficulty then burped unceremoniously and apologized in a whisper. She didn’t ask me about my mother again and just put on some videos of baby elephants being rescued from muddy ditches. That helped.

The first time I had a wet dream about Esperanza we were on a beach because I thought that’s where people do that kind of thing, sugar themselves with sand and salt grinding to the rhythm of the waves or some shit. The dream ended like a dropped water balloon, and I had a slightly harder time looking Esperanza in the face for about a day. Then it passed. At the end of the third and fifth wet dreams, Esperanza shouldered through my bedroom door in a pantsuit and a roid rage then shot me in the chest with an FBI standard issue Glock 9 mm.

After the arm-wrestling night, she came over the next day to take me somewhere. She told me to wear sweats. I thought we might go for a run along the beach through the houses we probably won’t ever afford and drop candy wrappers in their flower gardens. Instead, we ended up on Magnolia, maneuvering our way through a business district of warehouses and

multipurpose buildings until we came to a donut shop. Esperanza led us through to the back, which opened into a massive open-air gym that once could have been anything from an ice cream storage facility to a craft beer distillery. Now it was a Brazillian Jiuitsu dojo. An American flag and a flag of the Philippines sagged on the wall high up in the air, photos of Filipino fighters in shiny shorts posed, muscles taught in preparation to do harm. All along the wall were punching bags—a black one with duct tape, a brand new red one, and one shaped like the upper half of a band-aid colored man. The gym had to be two stories, a couple thousand square feet, the only enclosed space was a tiny bathroom I smelled right away, a very unventilated fecal aroma while the rest carried a familiar sweat, staleness, a faint lemon-scented disinfectant and something distinctly male. Past lives from previous tenants still haunted the room via boxes piled in the corner, haphazard mats thrown on the floor, and the banners hung up on ropes instead of fastened to the wall. Gouges of paint and plaster from other built-in structures that had been removed cascaded along the surface as if all of it could be sucked out at any moment and grow something else instead, some other temporary dream.

Esperanza said, “This is my cousin, Sensei Reyes.”

Sensei Reyes had fighter coming off him like fog. He was at least twice our age with a bald head shaped like a raptor and wore a blue, washed out gi. He had a short neck, short legs and dense rack of beef back. Esperanza was taller than him by a lot. They had the same thick eyebrows though he was much darker and kind of happier the way some people always seem to have a song or joke replaying in their heads.

A woman came out of the hallway, bringing with her the smell of butter, sugar and her own pleasant fragrance that was everything the room was not. Black hair hung to her ass. A little girl popped from behind her with pink frosting splattered down her shirt and around her face as if she threw her whole head into a pile of cupcakes and shook it. The girl skipped over to the band-aid colored torso punching bag man and began to climb him.

“Get down, Ana.”

The girl protested and frowned for the first time.

“But I love him,” Ana pleaded.

The real class began to trickle in. Aging men with youthful hopes of being champion mixed martial arts fighters or just not being bullied. They ignored me and Esperanza, which felt nice. Two women came in too. One a colorful older lady in peacock yoga pants and the other was a white lady named Noemi who was so timid that she almost disappeared entirely whenever she turned sideways. Sensei Reyes had us run in circles, taking turns punching the band-aid man, which I’m sure he thought was a grand gesture of feminist solidarity. I liked him for it. Then

he made us pair up, get on the ground, and practice untangling our legs from one another while trying to trap the other person. It was confusing as hell. I got paired with the yoga pants lady and thought this was all wrong.

“You’re just supposed to use leg,” Sensei Reyes told me. “That comes later.”

He pulled my hands off the old woman’s knees because I kept trying to reposition her. Esperanza was paired up with the two-dimensional woman while I had to slide my legs along a menopausal white lady’s yoga pants like two monstrous crickets wondering what the hell happened to the day. I wanted to be with Esperanza though with this much contact I might’ve passed out. The point of it all had vanished. I signed up for classes anyway.

And then Esperanza was gone completely. She didn’t text me the next day and didn’t show up to school or practice. The absence hurt. I was paired up with Noemi. Turns out the mousy timid woman that seemed dangerous as a lukewarm glass of water could put a submission hold on you that will lift your ghost to the ceiling.

A week passed and still nothing. Three other guys came into class, all of them teenagers like me and Esperanza, but not at all like me and Esperanza. I recognized their faces but never spoke to them or knew their names. One had enlarged adenoids and a whole lot to say even though he couldn’t breathe through his nose. Another had a skin condition that caused a kind of moldy crust to form at his joints. The last one was big, musky, queer, and would become my favorite. It was the saddest bunch of losers.

They smelled like boys, meaning they smelled like wet puppies—metallic and peppery with a dash of mildew. They weren’t like me and Esperanza at all. We had hard shoulders and jaws. We did the exercises as if they would never end because that’s what we were used to, practice had no final count. Everything began again and again to tear down our muscles for them to rebuild. The class had to run around the building four times before we could start. I ran full out for five minutes and lapped them all twice. I thought my heart would explode when I finally stopped. When it didn’t, I just laughed. No one else laughed even though it was funny to be so alive just then. They were afraid of me. I liked it. Sensei looked at me when he announced a tournament with the waive of a black and white flyer. I just stretched and tried not to think about her. Adenoids asked me what kind of stretches I was doing, and if I was sure that would be good for jujitsu. I told him any stretch is a good stretch, and the words came out so smooth and convincing it should’ve been etched on a rock and made a religion. He nodded and imitated my movement; then they all did. I had never experienced anything like it. They

weren't used to winning, and I could tell. The thing I knew for sure is I could do anything I wanted here.

The next day, still no Esperanza. I thought she was dead. She's dead. She died. Died. Died. Dead and done. I told myself. I'd rather her be alive than dead but dead rather than an asshole. Sensei paired me up with Reginald, the big softy, and left the dojo for a while. When he came back in he screamed.

“It's not football!”

I'd been taking turns shoulder ramming all three of the losers one at a time. Reginald was fun to push. He looked jiggy but was pretty solid and giggled a lot if I grabbed him by the man tit.

“She cheats, Mr. Sensei,” Reginald panted “Nips are off limits.”

“I don't care about your breasts.”

Sensei Reyes turned red at his own words, at the reality of his new students, but kept talking without a quiver in his aging voice. Adenoids fell on his ass in silent laughter, not recovering in time to get any other instructions. I was small here, and it felt strange not to have the most powerful legs and arms. I didn't know if I liked that yet or if it was worth the missed after school pizza comas at home.

“Get in bottom position.”

Reginald obeyed, fake wincing at pain in his left tit. Sensei took top position behind and said “this is good,” his two hands held together like the logo of a youth center. Even though Reginald was a buffalo I could still rotate him around with some effort. He, however, seemed completely shocked that he could not pin me with ease. I had no idea what was legal or illegal, technique or flight response. Reginald yelled that I was cheating again. Sensei told him to shut up and fight. The tone was familiar to me now, and I knew exactly where I was again. Sensei wasn't red anymore, never left during warmups because something new sprouted, and in that moment, he sensed glory was not just possible but likely.

After practice my muscles shook and my skin felt rubbed raw like paper under an eraser. It was good. Then Adenoids asked me if I was gay and if I had a dick. I hit him in the throat. Reginald fell down ass first laughing, but I helped Adenoids get on his feet anyway. That was pretty much how we said hello and goodbye. We were cool.

Two weeks passed without hearing from Esperanza, and I'd mourned her by losing six pounds and gaining a basket of bruises and scratches from anyone and anything Sensei put in front of me. People think emotions are what separate us from the animals, but they're wrong. It's winning (and thumbs) that make our species nearer to God than ordinary beasts. The stakes might be high or low or non-existent, but victory and defeat are everything. Competition inspires improvement. We make better food, superior tools, gain insight, develop art of strategy, wage war, topple empires, invent prejudices, tribes, branding to enable us to fight, cut, kill, and defeat. It's also really fun. Without competition we stop moving, and I'd rather be dead than stand still forever. I forget all the times I poured salt on snails just to watch them bubble up into hot soup. There was something primal, intentional, mystical about that—a life for a wish, a summoning of something dark and old. Glancing at Esperanza was wonderful and cruel like pouring salt on a snail, but I couldn't tell if she looked at me like that, with intention or by accident. To just take a life on accident seemed like a different kind of mysticism, a poorly timed joke from small headed gods reminding us that nothing is in our control, especially death and love.

Sensei Reyes paired me with Noemi the day I found out Esperanza was sick. Noemi put me in an arm bar eleven times before I bit her. After biting her out of loneliness and desperation, she seemed to think we'd become bonded somehow and started telling me her life story and national statistics for violent crime. I struggled to keep her forearm from sinking in around my throat while she said she dropped out of college because her chemistry professor was a sexual predator. She said she went to art school later.

“Nine out of ten women experience some degree of sexual assault in a lifetime,” Noemi said putting the squeeze on me even harder.

She was two thirds of my weight, twice my age, all bones and muscle like a skinless chicken on steroids. I finally got free only for us to start all over again.

“This used to be my only stress relief,” Noemi continued while wrapping her legs around my waist and crushing me tight. “Now I draw cat heads for people.”

I tapped out. She let me go.

“Cat heads?”

“Cat heads. Heads of peoples' cats. Custom jobs. They pay like \$40-\$50 each. People love their cats more than other people sometimes or themselves. Cats are like the best of us. I'll send you the link.”

I almost said that all cats look alike, but I didn't because Noemi would probably think that was racist. I just nodded and finally surprised Noemi with a take down. She giggled like it was the funniest joke ever, and I knew she'd gone crazy a long time ago but was fine with that. With my arm pulled to near point of break in the vice of Noemi's whole body, I believed Esperanza's claim of me meant a promise, an understanding of our whole selves.

I only joined the class for Esperanza even though she technically never asked me, never gave me a real choice, just led me there and suddenly I was staving off choke holds and grappling barefoot in a poorly air-conditioned warehouse. Maybe it was a gift, this personal, physical thing. Maybe it was nothing. I went to her house and knocked on the front door for the first time to check on her.

You never really know a person until you see their house. But when her grandmother answered the door, and I realized I knew nothing at all. The door opened and a wave of dust slid over my face. Skillets. Unopened Barbie doll boxes. Two dozen cans of mosquito repellent. Chairs stacked high to the ceiling, useful as a sculpture made of butter in a rainstorm. Magazines piled so dense and high their spines looked like thread in a tapestry. Tiki torches. Remote control cars. Posters rolled up. Star Wars collector's edition mugs. Candles of the Madonna in fragile rows like a carnival game. Little green baskets that once held berries: emptied. Garden hoses. PVC piping. Mattress foam stacked like pastries. Military-grade ration packaging, hollowed/consumed. A box of tire irons. Board games probably missing pieces. Lamp shades. Everything. There was everything in that house.

"She's got mono," her grandmother said, "sleeping it off. We can wake her up."

She pulled a tissue from her apron pocket and blew her nose like a tuba.

I didn't know Esperanza was being raised by her grandmother. I didn't know she had no parents in a wholly acceptable way. I had no parents because one was dead and the other was well I didn't know what to call mama then other than high and absent. Grief is like that; it walks upright sometimes and crawls slowly for other people.

I looked up symptoms of mononucleosis a.k.a. the kissing disease, which include fever, sore throat, and fatigue for weeks. It is often caused by the Epstein Barr virus, which can result in cognitive impairment over long periods of time. I wondered if that meant she would forget my name, my face and the rest. I told Esperanza's grandmother not to bother her and turned away. Esperanza avoided me, so I wouldn't visit. She didn't want me to see her house for a fairly good reason. There was a lot to see. I should've texted like a normal person, but I was angry and impatient and ready to forget her if I had to. After seeing the house I figured she'd want

me to forget her, forget their densely packed archive of advertisements, dolls and all the other remnants of human garbage/memory.

It was safe to assume, Esperanza had been tongue kissing a bunch of people from school and her church though we'd never kissed. She'd been hiding from me. I apologized to her grandmother and told to forget about it. I didn't bother responding to Esperanza once she started feeling better and texting again.

Then she was back. Esperanza was fully recovered and back at school and jiu-jitsu class, I couldn't ignore her anymore. I didn't have the words to say that I understood that we were impossible that we didn't fit together, so I didn't say anything. She walked over to me past the punching bags and I had an instant urge to hide behind one but held my ground. I knew that walk, the one with purpose, the one that said she would bottle me up or destroy me and nothing in between.

“Can you come to my house tonight?” she asked.

As if no time had passed at all, I gave her a sad “yes” cracked around the edges and felt stupid. Sensei ordered us to run around the building. During sparring I had to give Noemi back to Esperanza. The three of us were the only women left in the class except for the occasional trial sample attendant that never lasted more than two visits. Sensei let me work on kicks via Band-aid man for the sparring session. I kicked it so hard the neck tore open, a gash of yellow foam revealed itself. I quickly held the head back in place in a slight panic worried for little Ana, thinking I'd killed her best friend or her lover or her daddy then remembered he wasn't real. No one was hurt more than usual. I did front kicks to the sternum just to be safe.

Esperanza didn't talk all practice after confirming I would go to her house. In silence we rode our bikes back, her heavy eyebrows low and serious. Not saying things in the evening was our thing, but this was thicker. We were mad at each other.

Right as we approached her house, she nearly veered her bike into mine. Her eyes were invisible in the hollows of her face like always, but there was something else. I'd seen the inside of her home on accident. I'd seen the piles and piles of useless garbage, the musky smell of incarcerated time, cardboard and insects. People that lose their most valuable possession will start to collect all things trivial as a substitute. I didn't know what Esperanza's grandmother had lost. Esperanza found shame in it all, and that made me very angry. I wanted to hate her for hating her house, and I think I managed to do it, hate her for just a minute.

She announced herself to her grandma by shouting up at the ceiling, sending the sound over the columns of junk. Her grandma shouted back an acknowledgment then sneezed like a soprano from her bedroom, a scream in the shadows.

I wanted to grab Esperanza and throw her down and pick her up and throw her down again, yank at her bones and twist them in, make her my height and even smaller, collapse her skin and muscle into light and press it into my chest, keep her there with nothing to do but bang against my ribs to remind me that I still have her for as long as I can stand it.

We were both tired, she more than me and the buzzing of endorphins and the hurt of being ignored in a way that I wasn't entitled to left me almost high. She hugged me. Esperanza Duarte put her arms around me and held me to her like we hadn't seen each other for years and had been waiting for that day. I felt her ear slide against mine and her breath on my shoulder from above. It was a long hug. When she let me go, I thought I might pop like a soap bubble, but I stayed whole and she just sat down on her bed. I could see the tiredness from being sick for so many weeks and suddenly working out again, but she smiled and made room for me. Her legs stuck out inches past mine and she pulled a protein bar out of what seemed to be the air and started munching. After I laughed, she offered me one. We ate them together staring at the ceiling fan. Not long after she got halfway under the covers next to me then motioned for me to do the same. I had on my street clothes, but she didn't care. The lights were on and her grandma's allergies kept kicking up in the next room. When I came out to my mother and she told me to wash my hair, I went to the past. "You can't be gay," she told me. "Either way you can't be gay." She said it like a joke, like the idea of me was so preposterous as if being intersex meant that I did not belong to any other idea at all, as if I wasn't really there, just a cartoon pig or a toy on a shelf. Half amused and half terrified she turned away from me, and then that truly was all. I stood there in a minute, in a week, in a year and watched the paint change on the walls, all the color choices in reverse from gray to mauve to disastrous paisley wall paper when I was just a child waiting for pancakes on a Saturday morning, my parents dancing together in the kitchen over a steaming griddle.

I hadn't put much thought into how bodies are supposed to love each other. Maybe we had been lovers all that time, and I didn't recognize it. We'd grappled in class, held each other down, tugged at our joints to the brink of separation.

Esperanza took off her pants and underwear from beneath the covers so I couldn't see anything. Then she slid her legs around me sideways. I laid there for her, flat, still fully clothed for a while then she tugged everything off of me. Esperanza didn't touch me like I was an anomaly but a memory like a place she'd forgotten and missed deeply. It felt like being wrapped in hot dough then boiled alive. She shuddered and stopped moving, the salty sweat from her head and mouth warm against my neck. When things hurt me, time opens up and

shatters, but this was the opposite. This was being pitched through the universe and back, violent and swift without any pain at all.