

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

Joe Lombo

Facing Off

Mother Nature was finally melting the tire packed snow that had clung to Belgrade Street for days. Shadows cast by row homes crammed into one side of the street shielded a few lingering piles of dirty slush from the late afternoon sun. A rusty barbed wire fence on the other side was all that separated me and my friends from Allied Chemical's tanks and smokestacks. The breeze reeked of the tarry sludge that oozed from the bottom of the Frankford Creek at low tide.

I slid on the wet asphalt in my beat up sneakers like I was skating on ice while I waited for Bill to dig a street hockey ball out of a duffle bag loaded with sports equipment and his mom's gardening tools. Every time he looked down his hair fell in his eyes or his glasses slid down his nose.

I stick handled an invisible ball past imaginary defenders while calling my own play by play. As I darted around talking to myself, Poop tried to line the net up with the squiggly crease spray painted on the street. Matt held his stick at his waist and spit through the space between his teeth. He looked as cool as Rick MacLeish did when the Flyers warmed up.

"I found it," Bill said. He tossed a once orange ball now black with street grime toward me. "So, how did you talk your mom into letting you out, only?" Bill tacked only to the end of whatever he said for no good reason.

"I told you on the way home from school that I was playing."

"You say that every day, only."

"I guess he must have digested his milk and cookies," Poop said. When he'd knocked for me a few weeks ago Mom told him I couldn't come out until I finished digesting my food.

"Give it a rest, will ya Poop." I knew he hated being called by his nickname. His real name was Richard. He didn't like being called Dick,

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either.

“You want me to get Jay or Billy after you?” Poop was always threatening to have his older brothers beat somebody up.

“Knock it off, only.” Bill shot the ball at Poop and hip checked me. Bill already had a man’s body even though we were still in grade school. I was built like a number two pencil. When I flew into the fence it shook halfway up the block.

“I guess nobody else is coming. Let’s warm up and then shoot breakaways. First one to score five wins, only.”

Our warm up shots missed the net or rattled off Poop’s wide butt. His back was to us because he was trying to tune the oldies station in on the radio he stuck on the back of the net to keep it from tipping over. He hardly ever got any reception during the day because the smokestacks blocked the signal.

“Goddamn Radio. Hold up.” Poop turned the radio off and got into position. He played goal sitting down with his stick flat on the ground in front of him. With his wide body and curly hair, he covered the whole net except for the top corners. We had to aim high, which pissed him off because he didn’t wear a mask. The holes wouldn’t line up right because his head was too big.

It was almost impossible for me to get off a good shot because my stick blade was so worn down. Most of my shots were shanked dribblers that Poop easily brushed aside.

“I heard it might get cold enough to snow again next week. Another snow day would be cool, only.

“We’ll never get that lucky,” I said.

“Make your own snow days, Catholic School pussies,” Matt said. He could cut school whenever he wanted because his mom worked during the day and his dad walked out on them years ago.

“We don’t go to public school,” I said. The nuns told us nobody cared if you learned anything in public school and the kids who went there were

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going to hell unless they attended CCD classes.

"Yeah, our moms don't work only."

Poop shifted his weight from one butt cheek to the other. "School is for losers anyway. Jay's dropping out. My dad's getting him a job where he works."

I was about to say that was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard when I somehow got off a high, hard shot that grazed the top of Poop's head before striking twine. "Score!" I raised my hands and stick in the air just like the Flyers did when they scored.

"Hey, Mother Fucker, can't you see I'm not wearing a mask." Poop picked the ball out of the net and tried to fire it at me but he tripped just as he let it go. The ball dribbled out of his hand and the net crashed down on his back. He flounced around in his goalie pads like a shipwrecked survivor floating on a piece of wood.

I put my stick down as the ball rolled toward me, but it took a bad hop on one of the new cracks that all those studded snow tires and chains had carved into the street. The ball barely got airborne, but it was enough to clear my blade and funnel down the sewer.

"Why didn't somebody put something in front of the zewer opening, only?" When Bill slid the two metal lids off the top of the sewer his zit filled face turned redder than the sun that was inching below the tops of the chemical tanks. Plan A was to lower down two hockey sticks, balance the ball between the blades, and then raise them high enough for somebody to grab the ball.

"I'll lower the sticks. Matt, you reach down and grab the ball, only." Whenever Bill managed to balance the ball between the blades it fell off before Matt could snatch it, but Matt didn't seem to be trying real hard. "Where the hell is JO when you need him, only?" JO was Jimmy Olsen, a little guy with a terrible lisp who loved to slash us in the ankles when he played. We put up with it because he didn't mind being dangled into the sewer by his ankles, which was Plan B.

"I'm the only one strong enough to hold. Poop's too heavy even for me.

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It's you or Matt, only."

"Just leave it down there. I don't feel like playing anymore anyway," Matt said. Lately he was spending less time with us and more time hanging on the corner with the older kids.

I wanted to keep playing because I might not get out for another week because Mom was always grounding me but being lowered into a sewer was like bobbing for apples in a shit filled barrel.

"Joe should go. If he had a real stick the ball wouldn't have gone down there to begin with," Poop added after he'd finally gotten himself upright.

"If you could throw it wouldn't be down there, either."

"My arm was good enough to nail your front door with a few snowballs last night"

"You guys need to get some girlfriends or get high or something," Matt said as he picked up his stick and walked away.

Those snowballs had sounded like machine gun fire inside our house. The old man raced out to find the culprits but came back even madder when he couldn't find them.

"Your dad didn't see us even though we were hiding behind your car. What an asshole."

I'd called the old man an asshole plenty of times, but it really pissed me off to hear somebody else say it, especially Poop.

"Take that back," I said. Poop wouldn't so I shoved him. He didn't budge, but his tits jiggled under his shirt.

"He's got you by a hundred pounds, only."

"So what," I said just as the implications of what I'd done were starting to set in. I was sure Bill would step between us anyway. When he did, I'd go crazy and remind Poop that he was lucky Bill was holding me back.

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The Lenny came out of his house to see what was going on. Bill told him that Poop and I were going to rumble. Lenny told his sisters, who told god knows who else. In no time it looked like half the neighborhood had surrounded us. I prayed for a cop to drive by and break up the crowd or for somebody's mom to storm out her front door and lecture us on the evils of fighting before sending everyone home.

What I saw instead was Eddie hobbling towards us on one crutch. He'd dropped out of school a few years ago. He spent most of his time in the emergency room, getting casts and bandages put on body parts he claimed to have hurt in accidents nobody had seen. "Okay ladies," he said while re-clipping the bandage around his forehead. "No hair pulling, spitting or kicking in the balls. Everything else goes. Let's have a good, clean fight. Ding, ding."

The look on Poop's face was something between a grimace and a grin. He squinted, cocked his head to one side, and raised his fists in front of his face. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do. I'd been picked on a lot, but I'd never actually fought back before.

"Do something," somebody yelled. Poop tried to grab me. I nearly shit myself getting out of the way. He'd crush me like a boa constrictor if he got hold of me.

I started dancing and circling around him. I even added my version of the Ali shuffle to impress the girls.

"This ain't the fucking ballet," Eddie said before hands pushed me from behind and hurled me towards Poop's outstretched foot.

Just when I was getting used to the feel of cold asphalt against my cheek, Poop pounced on me. He put me in a headlock and growled like the wrestlers on TV did. "You give?" He asked every time he twisted my neck. My nose dug deeper into his dark and smelly armpit. I panicked when I thought I was about to suffocate. I flailed my fists and bony elbows like I was trying to pry myself out of a sealed coffin. I didn't stop until I smelled creek sludge.

Poop was hunched over. Globbs of blood splattered the gutter.

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"Look what you did. My fucking nose is bleeding."

"I didn't mean it. I couldn't breathe."

"You girls are pathetic," Eddie said.

It seemed like everyone shook their heads and waved their hands at us before they walked away. Poop arched his head back and pinched the bridge of his nose while I stood there, torn between wanting to help him and getting the hell out of there. Suddenly Jay barreled towards us in a flannel shirt with cut off sleeves and boots with heels thick enough to crush a car.

"It was an accident," I said.

He stopped and ran his fingers through his hair. Then he pushed me aside.

Jay got right in his brother's face. He told Poop he'd kill him if he ever quit like that again. Poop wiped his face with his sleeve and sobbed as Jay's index finger jabbed him in the chest.

"What are *you* looking at?" Jay asked

"Nothing," I said to the blood on my sneakers before sprinting home.

Joseph Lombo's work has appeared in Philadelphia Stories magazine. It will also appear shortly in BAP Quarterly, Sub-Lit Journal, The Northville and Chaffey Reviews and Word Catalyst Magazine. I have also received the Toni Libro award for Outstanding Masters Thesis from Rowan University