CONCRETE CHAMPIONS

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I

No newsperson recites heartfelt words over the city of Arlington, Texas, still I find myself watching little Batman accompanied by big Batman and his pal, Robin as they patrol the streets together, under the all-seeing eyes of the news cameras. A sunny day in Arlington, big Batman’s gut refuses to keep line with his belt. They stroll from crime scene to crime scene, thwarting villain after villain first with a bank robbery, then defending the helpless citizens from the terrorist Riddler, then getting rid of a bomb meticulously placed under a car. While bringing the Joker to his knees so that he may be returned to the grit and grime of Arkham Asylum, little Batman says nothing. He watches, proudly, dare I say, as Big Batman puts him under arrest. The Joker’s performance is completely in character—you can feel the chill running up little Batman’s spine for him as the Joker makes his—well, his jokes. “You’re going back to Arkham, Joker.” That is all big Batman monotonously has to say on the subject.

II

His fingerless gloves rob the palms of sense, they feel nothing—but the fingers become increasingly aware of their surroundings. Crisp air lingers on them as a reminder to the provoked runner what they are running for. None of this is lost, I’m sure, on Phoenix Jones as he surefootedly sprints after an armed man through the streets of Seattle.

III

I sit down and speak to no one. I don’t grin because I got out of class. I don’t cry, either. “Let’s just have the service and be done with it,” comes from my soon to be uncle. His chin goes up and he laughs. He glances at the slab for only a second, but his face droops if only for that second. Perhaps he’s getting the same cold, disapproving feeling
from his mother’s mug as I am. “How long are we going to be here?” I ask my mom, hoping that the service does not interfere with lunch. “It shouldn’t be too long. There’s going to be a, uhm, reception after the service, but we don’t have to go to that,” she says, stopping in the middle of her sentence to clean her glasses.

I.2

Little Batman walks with such a straight back he becomes an imposing figure. It suits him well, too-- almost nothing has to be done to be rid of the evil doers, and I can understand why. Such a little Batman with such a straight back, such a high chin that remains his only available feature under the black armor which responds strangely well to daylight. I read the article under the video finally-- I learn that little Batman’s name is Kyle. Kyle is seven. Kyle has leukemia. Big Batman is Kyle’s father.

II.2

When another symbol of vigilance arrives to wait with the victim for an ambulance so they may tend to her shredded neck, Jones bounds forward without so much as a twitch or a heavy foot. The concrete is yellow from the street lights. His boots challenge the concrete not to crack under his determination to capture the perp. His voice booms as he calls out the status of his chase to whoever is listening: “He’s south on Yesler and 2nd! Call the SPD! This man is armed!” Between each slam of his foot, he never misses a beat. His associates know the danger Jones is putting himself in; if the assailant’s bullet finds its way in between his eyes and pulls the content of our defender’s head onto the wall with it, Jones will undoubtedly be dead. He takes this risk so that his fingers may make amends for a bleeding woman. Unfortunately, his efforts fall short of success.

III.2

The man of God speaks but I don’t listen. His voice murmurs through my head with the threatening sound of bees buzzing, which becomes relaxing, stabilizing, when listened to long enough. Either way, the content does not matter. Those sounds mean nothing on her colorless skin. Skin that had seen times I never did. The words give her blue outfit a frame and ash settles on her skin where there hasn’t been a fire and now school doesn’t matter to me anymore. I can miss it, I can
go back. But either way in an hour, seventy years of experience that claimed to love and others claim to have loved, will be put into a box and deprived of her natural right to rot quickly. There is a very slim chance that she will break the walls of her coffin and return to the soil she so wishes to become a part of again. I think about this while the priest speaks his words, blessing the departed, and I am kind of afraid to be alive. Her son, my soon to be uncle, doesn't take his eyes off of his mother. He doesn't cry.

I.3

At the end, Kyle is rewarded the key to the city, which glints gold and purple glitter, for his efforts to protect his community. Kyle receives attention, vast amounts which some people only ever get to dream of. Confetti is thrown, Kyle is celebrated, and he is a hero. All the while a cowardly villain, one who stays in the shadows, tears through his body. Kyle's blood reeks of disease, but the only person who appears to smell it is Kyle's father. A figure in local government stands in place of the mayor, who was too busy to attend the event.

II.3

Benjamin Fodor, the man they call Phoenix Jones, the Rain City Superhero, has no relation to this woman. He has a wife and a child—and this bleeding woman is neither of them. Surely he has a reason for this. Perhaps Ben knows how soft he really is, how easily a blade would draw through his flesh. Maybe he dreams of it. Perhaps in these dreams he sees his mask pulled from his corpse by the stranger who finds him. Perhaps he sees how his mask becomes the stranger's skin, and their veins bulge and bleed, as it has for him. Perhaps, Ben dreams of his body consumed by shadow, while every inch of Phoenix Jones lives on in illumination.

I.4

Later that day, I think about the boy named Kyle, and I imagine that he went home with both his father and his leukemia. They went home together, the three of them. Whether they drove through sunny streets or a night covered in slick oil, a shadow lingered with Kyle. The shadow nestled a comfortable spot next to Kyle in case he was in this for the long run. It will see the end of Kyle's life. Perhaps it won't but most likely it will. However, maybe it watched the events of
today. Maybe it saw Kyle, a seven year old boy, living his dreams as far as they had grown to this day. It could have even contemplated these things: “Surely, the boy’s life is mine. I have nurtured him from birth, providing all care needed for a child to die, but after what transpired today, there is something to be desired. An incomplete life houses misery and suffering. Sitting in front of me, though, is a child who has lived his life with meaning when most adults have not. Perhaps it would be in good taste to play his shadow a little longer, and see what things may come when a complete child is given extra time.”

II.4

The next morning, I imagine that Benjamin Fodor did not go to work. He did not dawn his mask, and he did not move to defend his city from criminals. Phoenix Jones slept in and held his wife, felt her skin and understood that it was warm. He ran his fingers through his son’s hair and every strand tickled them, serving as a reminder. He tasted the tart of oranges and listened to music. He cleaned, and he loved his home. Ben Fodor stayed in his home, and everything was clear to him. Everything illuminated, he saw every dust particle in every sinking crack and crevice and appreciated it. There were no shadows lurking in his home that day, rather they walked passed his house, flicking their hands toward him in dismissal and saying, “He will come on his own terms.”

III.3

The day of my uncle’s mother’s funeral, I am sure that he cried. Although I couldn’t see it while I watched him, waiting in line to shake the hands of the few people who came to see his mother off to a darker world. I look to my uncle, and he looks over his shoulder and it frames one side of his face. His chin is strong, his eyes thoughtful and secure. I imagine him in a mask; a champion of the concrete towers who swoops down on his prey and shows them the meaning of fear. I see him becoming the mask, becoming a symbol that lifts him above the status of man, and makes him invulnerable to the dangers that dwell in the dark recesses of the world. I see him chasing shadows through the night, illustrating for them just how easy it is for a man to laugh in their faces.