

Phys-Ed

No-one taught me what to do. I closed my fist and eyes, and reached back, flailing, pulling down the curtain of the grey New England sky upon us all.

Spitting rain, early spring, gym class, on the Junior high-school football field, slick with guano from the flocks of gulls that flew from garbage piles across the road. And it was strange. Not that John had chosen me again, for no reason at all. The way a child might cut a worm to pieces, pour salt on a slug or pull the legs from an insect. I remember the sound of his laughter like a heavy cough. Alan's too, that same wild giggle I had heard before he pushed me down a flight of concrete steps in middle school. He didn't even try to slip away. Just stood there in the echoes.

We were running an obstacle course and John kept trying to sweep my legs, push me over, or cut me off. I was chubby, plagued with zits but had good balance and was quick when scared and I was scared but it was also weirdly fun. Like the thrill of driving too fast on a dirt road in the dark. John was slow, too big for his body, and I hopped, and cut, leaped and scurried to the finish, first in the class, just a little winded and surprised.

When all the other kids began to disappear into the large green doors, John and Alan blocked the way. Mr. Holt, the ex-marine phys-ed instructor, gave the four of us a long look, sighed and shook his head. I still remember that: the flash of his blue tracksuit disappearing into darkness. The click of a door coming closed. The finality of death, my death. And I was alone. Except for Eric, little Eric Ross, trudging towards us, terrified, his hands pushed deep into the pockets of an oversized blue sweatshirt, taking his place like a second in a duel—stopping two feet behind me, saying nothing. John sized me up, gave a push on my shoulder. Pushed again. Looked over at Alan. Smiled brightly. Happy.

This isn't an after-school special.

I got lucky. I was terrified, and it was more a spasm than a punch. But then the crack of cartilage. And through Koval's trembling hands, so much blood.

And when I start to think that we are driven more by fear and anger, more the product of our terrors than our love, I think of Eric's arm around my back. *Holy shit Joel, what was that, what the hell was that?* And I wept. We wept. Then laughed. Then wept. *We're fucked*, he said. *I know*, I said. *I'm fucked*, I said, *I'm fucked*.

Joel Peckham is a poet, essayist, scholar, and aspiring musician. He's published three collections of poetry and appeared in many journals, including *Black Warrior Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattle*, and *The Southern Review*.