

To This Day by Shane Koyczan

To This Day

When I was a kid

I used to think that pork chops and karate chops
were the same thing

I thought they were both pork chops
and because my grandmother thought it was cute
and because they were my favourite
she let me keep doing it

not really a big deal

one day

before I realized fat kids are not designed to climb trees
I fell out of a tree
and bruised the right side of my body

I didn't want to tell my grandmother about it
because I was afraid I'd get in trouble
for playing somewhere that I shouldn't have been

a few days later the gym teacher noticed the bruise
and I got sent to the principal's office
from there I was sent to another small room
with a really nice lady
who asked me all kinds of questions
about my life at home

I saw no reason to lie
as far as I was concerned
life was pretty good
I told her "whenever I'm sad
my grandmother gives me karate chops"

this led to a full scale investigation
and I was removed from the house for three days
until they finally decided to ask how I got the bruises

news of this silly little story quickly spread through the school
and I earned my first nickname

pork chop

to this day
I hate pork chops

I'm not the only kid
who grew up this way
surrounded by people who used to say
that rhyme about sticks and stones
as if broken bones
hurt more than the names we got called
and we got called them all
so we grew up believing no one
would ever fall in love with us
that we'd be lonely forever
that we'd never meet someone
to make us feel like the sun
was something they built for us
in their tool shed
so broken heart strings bled the blues
as we tried to empty ourselves
so we would feel nothing
don't tell me that hurts less than a broken bone
that an ingrown life
is something surgeons can cut away
that there's no way for it to metastasize

it does

she was eight years old
our first day of grade three
when she got called ugly
we both got moved to the back of the class
so we would stop get bombarded by spit balls
but the school halls were a battleground
where we found ourselves outnumbered day after wretched day
we used to stay inside for recess

because outside was worse
outside we'd have to rehearse running away
or learn to stay still like statues giving no clues that we were there
in grade five they taped a sign to her desk
that read beware of dog

to this day
despite a loving husband
she doesn't think she's beautiful
because of a birthmark
that takes up a little less than half of her face
kids used to say she looks like a wrong answer
that someone tried to erase
but couldn't quite get the job done
and they'll never understand
that she's raising two kids
whose definition of beauty
begins with the word mom
because they see her heart
before they see her skin
that she's only ever always been amazing

he
was a broken branch
grafted onto a different family tree
adopted
but not because his parents opted for a different destiny
he was three when he became a mixed drink
of one part left alone
and two parts tragedy
started therapy in 8th grade
had a personality made up of tests and pills
lived like the uphill were mountains
and the downhill were cliffs
four fifths suicidal
a tidal wave of anti depressants
and an adolescence of being called popper
one part because of the pills
and ninety nine parts because of the cruelty
he tried to kill himself in grade ten

when a kid who still had his mom and dad
had the audacity to tell him “get over it” as if depression
is something that can be remedied
by any of the contents found in a first aid kit

to this day
he is a stick on TNT lit from both ends
could describe to you in detail the way the sky bends
in the moments before it’s about to fall
and despite an army of friends
who all call him an inspiration
he remains a conversation piece between people
who can’t understand
sometimes becoming drug free
has less to do with addiction
and more to do with sanity

we weren’t the only kids who grew up this way
to this day
kids are still being called names
the classics were
hey stupid
hey spaz
seems like each school has an arsenal of names
getting updated every year
and if a kid breaks in a school
and no one around chooses to hear
do they make a sound?
are they just the background noise
of a soundtrack stuck on repeat
when people say things like
kids can be cruel?
every school was a big top circus tent
and the pecking order went
from acrobats to lion tamers
from clowns to carnies
all of these were miles ahead of who we were
we were freaks
lobster claw boys and bearded ladies
oddities

juggling depression and loneliness playing solitaire spin the bottle
trying to kiss the wounded parts of ourselves and heal
but at night
while the others slept
we kept walking the tightrope
it was practice
and yeah
some of us fell

but I want to tell them
that all of this shit
is just debris
leftover when we finally decide to smash all the things we thought
we used to be
and if you can't see anything beautiful about yourself
get a better mirror
look a little closer
stare a little longer
because there's something inside you
that made you keep trying
despite everyone who told you to quit
you built a cast around your broken heart
and signed it yourself
you signed it
"they were wrong"
because maybe you didn't belong to a group or a click
maybe they decided to pick you last for basketball or everything
maybe you used to bring bruises and broken teeth
to show and tell but never told
because how can you hold your ground
if everyone around you wants to bury you beneath it
you have to believe that they were wrong

they have to be wrong

why else would we still be here?
we grew up learning to cheer on the underdog
because we see ourselves in them
we stem from a root planted in the belief
that we are not what we were called we are not abandoned cars stalled out and sitting empty

on a highway
and if in some way we are
don't worry
we only got out to walk and get gas
we are graduating members from the class of
fuck off we made it
not the faded echoes of voices crying out
names will never hurt me

of course
they did

but our lives will only ever always
continue to be
a balancing act
that has less to do with pain
and more to do with beauty