

The Mustangs

In another life, my older brother was a beautiful, muscular boy who could jump from a standing position to grab a missed shot right from the rim and either hit a waiting outlet on a fast break or spring back up and drop it through the net for an easy two points. He had thin ankles, long lean legs with high calf muscles balled tight like fists and split like upside-down hearts—runner's legs, jumper's legs, Indian legs. He also had the upper body of a Mojave man—wide-chested, broad-shouldered, arms and hands that hung down near his knees, *like slingshots* is what my mother says, meaning, *he is a fighter*.

He played varsity basketball for our small town high school, the Needles Mustangs. They wore royal blue and white. A bright blue mustang was painted on the front of the gymnasium, another inside against the brick wall, and a third in a circle on the wooden middle half-court. Mustangs. I associate them with basketball. I have felt them in me—hooves rumbling like weather in my ears and sternum, jolts of muscle like bolts in my throat—the way my brother must have felt those herds stampeding his veins in those years, and done his best to break them.

I love my brother best in memories such as this one: I sat in the rattling bleachers of the Needles Mustangs gymnasium with my mother, my father, and all of my siblings, watching my brother run out to the warm-up song “Thunderstruck” by AC/DC. It begins with an unhinged, chant-like yell, followed by the strike of the word *thunder* and then *thunderstruck*. The word *thunder* is growled fifteen times followed by nineteen war-cried versions of *thunderstruck*.

Dressed in Mustang-blue tear-away warm-up pants and shirts, my brother and his teammates—some of whom were from our reservation—were all glide and finesse. Their high tops barely touched the floor. They circled the court twice before crossing it and moving into a layup drill while “Thunderstruck” filled the gymnasium. They were all the things they could ever be—they were young kings and conquerors.

To that song, they made layup after layup, passed the ball like a planet between them, pulled it back and forth from the floor to their hands like Mars. "Thunderstruck" played so loudly that I couldn't hear what my mother hollered to cheer my brother—I could only see her mouth opening and closing. I was ten years old and realized right there on those bleachers thundering like guns that this game had the power to quiet what seemed so loud in us—that it might have the power to set the fantastic beasts trampling our hearts loose. I saw it in my mother, in my brother, in those wild boys. We ran up and down the length of our lives, all of us, lit by the lights of the gym, toward freedom—we Mustangs. On those nights, we were forgiven for all we would ever do wrong.