

Stickfighting Days, by Olufemi Terry

Thwack, Thwack, the two of them go at it like madmen, but the boys around them barely stir with excitement. They both use one stick and we find this swordy kind of stickfighting a bit crappy. Much better two on one or two on two – lots more skill involved and more likelihood of blood.

I turn to Lapy. “Let’s go off and practise somewhere. This is weak.” Lapy likes any stickfight, but almost always does what I say. His eyes linger ruefully on Paps and the other boy – don’t know his name but I see him a lot – and then he follows me.

I run almost full tilt into Markham and he gives me a grin, like we’re best pals and he’s been looking for me. Markham is my rival. We’ve beaten each other roughly the same number of times. Well, six to five in his favour, but one of my victories was a beauty, a flowing sequence of sticks that even I couldn’t follow before I smashed his nose in nicely. Almost broke it. The satisfaction of Markham’s watery-eyed submission that day makes me smile easily back at him.

“Wanna mix it up?” Markham’s eyes aren’t smiling any more; he won the last one and thinks he’s on a roll. I know better.

“We could,” I come back smoothly, “but it wouldn’t mean much.” I hold up Mormegil. I’ve told no one I’ve named my sticks though I’m not ashamed. I love Mormegil but I don’t think the others would understand. “I’ve only got one stick with me.” I cock my head to one side enquiringly at him. To be honest, I’ve been leaving Orcrist, my other, so I don’t have to get into any serious battles. Everyone knows I’m a two-stick man. But, I’m not ready to go up against Markham again just yet. Or any of the other top stickfighters. I’ve been trying some new moves. I feel close to a breakthrough in terms of technique. But it’s not quite there and until it is, I only carry Mormegil. Mormegil is as long as our regulations allow, a lovely willow poke, dark willow – that’s why I chose the name. It means black sword in Tolkien’s language. A sword with a mind of sorts. Turin wielded it, and it would cut anything, anyone eagerly. In the end it took his own life to avenge those he killed. My Mormegil has little knobs at the joint and one tip is nicely pointed – we’re not allowed to sharpen sticks – but this is natural. Mormegil is a killing machine, even though I’ve never done for anyone yet. But I will. I like Markham, but I’d like to kill him. I dream of doing it in front of a huge pack of boys. Clinically.

Markham’s henchman, Tich, is a one-stick man but he now holds up two. “You can use this one.” He throws it to me and I catch it easily, angry at being forced to fight. I force a deep gulp of air into my lungs. Fighting angry is bad! Only Simon ever did it effectively and where’s he now? I give Lapy a confident look, taking the measure of the unfamiliar stick as I do. It’s rubbery, too bendy but unlikely to break. It’s also too light. Much too light.

Markham’s not much one for warm-ups, he bounces from one toe to another like a boxer, rolls his head, then gestures to me that he’s ready. I already see a ring of boys forming around us, keen for a real spar and not that sword stuff.

He comes at me, neither quick nor slow, his arms wide. One of his sticks, an ash thing, is almost as good as Mormegil. He let me hold it once, before we were rivals. Stiff as hell and with a good weight, maybe an inch shorter than my beauty. I fend him off easily. Markham is good but he's cautious. He knows I'll not risk much with an unknown stick. I could keep him off with Mormegil but I feel I've got to try one of my new moves. No one'll attach too much to this particular fight so I can afford to be bold. But I'm cunning too. That's what got me to where I am. That and good reflexes.

I hold Mormegil in my left hand and the unfamiliar stick in my right, gripped in the middle – an outdated form I know, but very good for riposting against an over-eager opponent. Here he comes, Markham, his sticks a blur more from technique than power. In goes Mormegil to break that rhythm and then I bring my whippy stick in to catch the one in Markham's left. It is too bendy to give me much opening but I am quick, and I know not to go for a body blow; the opportunity is small and he'd be able to retaliate. I bang Mormegil against the outside of his wrist, the bony bit, all the while twirling my right hand to keep him caught up. I try for his knuckles but he is no fool, Markham. He pulls back a step, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. I watch him change his grip to match mine. There's no sweat on me yet! He's not angry enough to make a serious error but I feel in my gut, now's the time to let him – all the boys – see what I've been working on. I drop my right grip so that I'm holding both sticks sword like. I bang them together once, and advance on him. This is me at my most fearsome: my speed frightens opponents and no one knows exactly what I've got planned so it's now or never. Our sticks clatter against each other left to left, right to right and cross-wise. I use the bendy stick to hold his every thrust and I am glad that the whippiness absorbs much of the power. Markham settles into a pattern and at the last second, I drop one of my parries so that his stick whistles on, at the same time, lowering Mormegil so that my face is unprotected. Markham falls for it and doesn't try to halt his stroke, lunging at my face with gangs of force. Trust him to try and maim me – and this contest means nothing. Both his sticks are held high...so I fall to one knee with both of mine ready, my mind blotting out the murmured wave of anticipation from the crowd. I've thought long about this, long enough that there's no need to think now. It's not enough to go for the balls, the most vulnerable spot. No, a quick stickfighter can inflict double damage. I stab with Mormegil at his crotch, relishing its rigidness and the pain it will cause, yet pulling the stroke a little, for I am a boy also, I know what it means to strike full strength there. Better to kill someone with a temple blow than that. At the same time, I bang the bendy stick on the ball of his knee as hard as I can and roll.

I come to my feet expecting to see Markham in the toils of agony. He feigns total indifference at first, then allows us to see he's in some pain, but only from his knee. He hobbles backward a step, kicking it out to ease it. I wait, tasting the moment but puzzled as to why he isn't clutching his balls howling.

A deep voice rolls out, that of the judge: "Halt, boys!" Markham turns to him, a mixture of reluctance and relief on his face. I'm glad, and now every boy there turns toward the judge. He's not a stickfighter. Not even a boy, the judge. His real name is Salad but we use both. I don't

know whether he gave us the art of stickfighting, but he knows the rules and enforces them when he's around. Sometimes he's unseen for days, but his word is binding always, and not because we're afraid. The judge has a fearsome appearance, he's all muscle, like carved wood, his arms bulge and this seems the reason for his shabby shirts – it isn't – and the strain of his thighs against his corduroys makes his hands seem normal, fragile even. But the judge, Salad, is sick. At times, he can't stop coughing and, somehow, it is known among us that the muscles have surrendered their strength though they are preserved in form. The judge's voice is what commands our respect, mostly. He is very fair too.

"What's in your pants, Markham?" the judge is quietly stern. He stands with his hands behind his back. Some of the boys are already taller than him. Markham knows he'll be forced to prove that he didn't cheat, so with little ado, he pulls out through the top of his pants a thick sponge, much squashed, and hands it over to Salad. I grin, but joy is short lived. The judge pronounces: "Markham is disqualified. Match annulled." Damn! I was certain he'd award me a victory, but now it's worked against me that the match wasn't a proper one. And everyone who matters has seen my new move too so the element of surprise, my tactical advantage, is lost. I don't waste time trying to appeal to the judge; he's very strict, and this is why we respect him. I walk away too quickly for anybody to speak to me, Lapy at my shoulder.

In the evening I practise my forms with Lapy, who'd be a good stickfighter if he could be bothered. He never says much, but I like him for this. He's no pushover, Lapy. If he tells me something I listen; he knows what he's about. He's got the manner of a champion stickfighter: you can never tell what's on his mind and he never seems afraid. When he feels like being scarce, even I won't see him.

Finally, I light a cigarette butt I found and ask him the question that's burned on my lips for hours. "What d'you think of the judge's decision earlier?"

He stops to glance at me in the middle of a stick manoeuvre. "Pretty bog-standard. He cheated but the judge didn't want to give you a total victory. Psychologically that would have demoralized Markham too much." I watch him ponder whether to say more before he begins to weave his sticks once more. Sometimes, I think of giving up this stickfighting lark altogether. I'm thirteen and getting too big to spend hours practising my sticks. The smart boys spend their days poking and scouring the dump. There's a lot of valuable stuff here – it's not just home.

The judge surprises me early the next morning; he's been watching me from behind a car wreck. Usually I'm about early, practising my sticks, snooping on what others are doing. When I notice him, I wonder how he escaped my eye for so long; it's hard to conceal such a bulky body.

He says, his voice hoarse: "Well met, Raul." The judge – Salad, I want to call him as the older boys do – talks like this sometimes. He moves out from behind the wreck heavily, though I know just how agile he is.

“Salad,” I say, continuing my single stick forms. I’m not exactly angry, but it won’t hurt if he thinks I am. He likes me. I feel him waiting; his silence tells me something of his mood.

“My decision yesterday was based on what I felt was fair.” I wait, hoping he’ll blurt something. “I know you and Markham are rivals. I know how evenly matched you two are. I know you feel betrayed, you think I’ve given him the edge because he’s seen your new moves.” I’m so stunned by Salad’s words that my stick hangs momentarily in the air. It’s best to neither confirm nor deny, so I continue practising, keeping my face flat. My thoughts race. I now feel sheepish, angry, afraid and resentful of the judge all at once so I push these feelings away. My concentration is so strong that when I stop to breathe a few minutes later, Salad is no longer there. At first I’m glad, and not just because my chest is heaving. But then it hits me that he wanted to tell me something and then didn’t. I am hurt rather than curious. Even if it is just more stories – it is Salad after all who tells us about Mormegil, Turin and Beren – he should have said his piece.

I practise with Lapy much of that day, in a remote bit of the dump. He’s a good partner, cagey. I use my new moves a couple of times but with no success. By the evening our feet blister from acid waste, and I feel like crap. My sadness has nothing to do with fighting sticks.

I feel no better the next day and decide perhaps what I need is not more practice but to trade blows with someone. I go in search of Markham but before I find him, I come upon a group formed up in a circle around two boys, fifteen-year-olds. I know one of them, Malick; he’s a brute, but I’ve never seen the other. They’re going at it. Malick uses a lone stick, swings it like a club although it’s regulation thickness. His fights are popular because he’s sly, savage. We’ve seen the judge pull him off people a time or two. Malick is actually not so brutish, in my opinion. I think he plays it up because he’s not liked and wants to disgust us even more. The other boy uses two sticks and is very good. He blends power and finesse very well; he’s strong on both hands. I wonder if he’s from the dump. Malick will lose and so I stay to watch, even though I’m eager to fight this morning. His opponent seems popular, the crowd murmur his name, Peja, in a way that I detest, despite his skill. When he disarms Malick a little later, it’s done without viciousness so that Malick stands empty-handed but unhurt. His eyes roll wildly in his head as he considers his options. I feel sure Malick is on the point of throwing himself at Peja to grapple him to the ground but he doesn’t. The fight is over.

Before anyone can move off, Salad pushes another boy forward by the shoulders, into the circle, and points to me. The judge only occasionally proposes fights in this way – it’s not the role of a judge, really, is it? But when he does, there’s excitement. This boy is a little shorter than me, sandy-haired, compact. His face is bland and I know with a jolt in my belly that he’ll be good, probably better than Markham. Salad has put me on the spot but happily I’m spoiling for a fight. I step forward with a readiness that’s very like a thrill for blood. I don’t know him, I may never see him again but I want badly to hurt him in unusual ways with my sticks. Break his wrist or knock out his front teeth. Around us, as we prepare, lots of younger boys, tens and elevens. A trio of Malick’s friends hang about too.

We both take time to limber up. For me it's a chance to study my opponent. With a signal, the judge gets us going. Sandy hair comes right in, quick as mercury and hits my knuckles, surprisingly hard. He does not dance back and we spar up close so my longer reach is a disadvantage. He manages to catch my other knuckles. He's done something to his sticks, this one; they are somehow very hard. Being hit twice so quickly calms me. I'm sweating already and my mind is blank save for a desire to humble this boy. His quickness is at least equal to mine, I think, without dismay. I don't know that he'll tire before me either; my stomach is a pit and my vision blurs round the edges. I should've eaten something but that's not a thought for the present. The next time he launches an attack I go back at him equally hard. His right hand is a little weaker, his ripostes less certain on that side, so I force him to retreat with Orcrist, trying to double his wrist back on itself. He sidles away but I follow, banging his elbow. He tries to reply and succeeds in getting his right hand free. The crowd has been quiet and as we take a moment to breathe, it feels like we all take in air together. This time when he closes with me, Mormegil keeps him away, but I cannot do this for long and I only want him to think I'm tired. He is cautious too – his elbow is likely giving him pain and he teases me with his left hand, batting at Mormegil. I launch myself at him once more, feeling like I did against Markham, that it is now or never. I'm not sure what I'll do but I feel confident enough to respond to anything. He's quick as lightning and rash – going for the eyes when he could have thumped my knuckles again. But he's in close once more and we trade blow and parry until my arms feel they might fall from my shoulders and my breathing fills my ears. I force him to aim a blow at my ribs, leaving my left side open, knowing he'll take the opening. It stings – I feel the skin redden almost instantly – and I drop to one knee, reeling a little bit. He pauses – he lacks the killer instinct – one stick above his shoulder; the other is pointed at me to ward off any blow that may come. But my stroke is aimed once again at the knee, too low for his block, and I lunge rather than swing, to jab him full on the ball of his kneecap, twisting Orcrist – not Mormegil – to cause more pain. He stumbles back, almost dropping a stick as he hops to clasp his injured knee. Mormegil comes up as I shoot up off my own knee like it's a launch pad though it hurts like hell to do that. I pull my stroke at the last second, grudgingly.

There's something in his eyes – he's not afraid – but I see recognition beyond fear – and acceptance of what I'm about to do, of what I am. Killer. I pull the blow, or push it rather so I miss his temple – the thought flashes through me, through my entire body like a lash, that I don't know this boy and can't kill him. Mormegil lacerates his ear instead. And having changed the stroke, I drop my stick. My knuckles sear again as if in sympathy with him. And I breathe once more, like a bellows, exhausted and desperate suddenly to sit. Sandy hair still clutches his knee, ignoring his torn ear. He's on the ground now in agony and my sorrow is complete. Salad eyes me gravely but I can't abide his eyes on mine; there's only shame in this win. It takes all my willpower to not leave Orcrist and Mormegil as I walk off. Part of me notices – and is bitter – that no one chooses to follow me, to ask what's wrong.

I feel shunned but the dump is actually a big place and boys here have enough of a struggle to survive not to worry over someone feeling down. I cannot find Lapy and even the lazy search of a day does not turn him up. Hunger attacks my insides suddenly and I hunt for food for hours. I even leave the dump to see what can be scavenged outside. I take Mormegil, tucked under my clothes – for protection. The fearful looks, the clutched purses of the outside are somehow welcome, an escape from loneliness. At least I'm noticed. People on the outside are scared of me but not because I fight sticks. I'm an urchin, a snot-faced, scuffed boy in rags that they want to pity but can't. I stuff my head with stale old chicken and bacon cadged from a greasy restaurant and go back to the dump, hating and enjoying the nervous looks.

When I can't take any more loneliness, I decide to go and find him, the one I nearly killed. That's how I think of him, and I can't shut him out of my thoughts. I'm resolved to go and see how he is. To explain myself. Perhaps to even say sorry, even though I don't know what for. The thing is, I don't know where he stays, perhaps he's not even a dump kid. I ask boys I know and even boys I don't, describing him, hoping they saw the fight. I get a jumble of answers; short sandy-haired boys are a dime a dozen anywhere, I suppose. I give up, then bump into him as I go in search of Lapy once more, just to keep active. He's practising with some mates. They stop as I draw near. He gives me an almost friendly nod, though I notice his eyes are guarded, like when a madman's in the room. Talking is an effort, my tongue feels thick and ashy, and I have to ask him for a word twice before he understands. We go some way away and he makes a show of dropping his sticks, to impress his friends, I suspect. I conceal my smile.

I say it all at once, afraid to stop even for breath: "Look, I don't even know your name, and I'm not sure this will come out the right way, but I just wanted to say sorry. It was a good fight, you're a good fighter. I know what I did wasn't technically illegal, but I feel an apology is needed." I wrestle down the urge to go on. Laconic Lapy. I must be like him. Like the Spartans too. Sandy hair thrusts his hand at me like we've just played tennis or some other cruddy gentlemanly sport. There are no bruises on him; the ear looks whole. For an instant I think I imagined the whole thing.

"Tuor," he introduces himself. I smile again but not with relief, with real amusement. He's no Tuor. Salad's stories! "It was even steven," he continues. "A good fight like you said, and I would've done the same in your place." And abruptly as that there's nothing left to say for either of us. I try to give him a smile that's not so grateful, friendlier, before I swivel and make off. The clacking of sticks starts up again immediately and I feel less guilty.

Days pass before I pick up my sticks again. When I do, I have a strange sense that it's not me that swings Mormegil or stabs with Orcrist, but some unseen beast that slips into me. The feeling leaves me quite numb. I try to explain it to Lapy but he looks at me as if I've lost my marbles. He's not afraid to practise with me though, our friendship is the same. I neither avoid Markham nor seek him out but he's in my thoughts. Concede to Markham, give up this whole racket, my ambitions as a stickfighter, pass Mormegil on to some eight-year-old coming up, and

do something less deadly, less emotionally sapping. That's what part of me feels. I too could lose an eye, or be killed.

It rains for what feels like a week and the dump is in wretched mood. There's nothing to do all day but take shelter. I experience strange exhilarations, tire myself with mad quests that keep me out in the rain. Lapy doesn't try to settle me down; he's known me too long. The morning of the third day, I wake shivering, still muddy and wet from the evening before, and with both sticks clenched in my left fist like a lifeline. Lapy gives me water, tries to swaddle me but I'm already too hot. I'm also too weak to push off the stinking kerosene-smelling blanket which suffocates me. I wake from dreams in which the sandy-haired Tuor sets me alight with a burning stick. Other boys I have fought look on, bored rather than excited.

When I wake properly, the sun peers thinly through high clouds. I smell smoke somewhere not far off but the sight and warmth of the sun is rousing enough. Lapy has left me, likely in disgust at my screams and moans. I'm surprised at how steady I feel on my feet. Awake, I remember that Salad was also in my fever dreams and I'm suddenly dying to know what he wanted to tell me when he came to watch me practise. But first I wander aimlessly, hoping for water and perhaps a bite. I know where I can sometimes get food from someone. Not a stickfighter, but he's so good at scavenging he doesn't care if we steal from him. Sometimes.

I'm ravenous and tear at some bread so fresh it must be from yesterday, and not crust either. I've seen virtually no one but a radio is playing nearby, a warbly song I recognize but can't put a name to. I sit next to the scavenger's sleeping den long after I've wolfed his food, somehow more wobbly from having eaten. I stand, and there he is. Tauzin – I think, watching me smugly. He's a lanky, knobby thing, all bony knees and thrust-out elbows, not at all tough so I don't expect him to try anything.

He speaks before I can thank him. "That bread was poisoned. I left it as bait for whoever's been stealing my stuff. Rat poison," he adds unnecessarily. "Bet you didn't know I was a master poisoner. Had no idea it was you, but I don't care really. You might not even die." He's talking too much, yabbering on as though we're in a classroom somewhere, or mates, and what he says really matters. I stick my hand down my craw, squeezing my fingers into a point and forcing them as hard as I can past my gullet. He stops, stunned, and I aim the flood of mush that comes spurting out at him even though he's not stupid, he stopped and stood about ten feet away. A second smaller gush of puke rises, and, now I'm sure it's all out. I smile.

"Too late," he tells me, but he's no longer so cool, and not just because I took him by surprise emptying my stomach. No, he's shitless now 'cause I'm advancing on him, both sticks suddenly, magically, in my left hand, a trick I've practised loads to get really good at. He backs up a couple of steps, shuffling as though he'll wet himself if he lifts his feet.

"The poison's already working on your system."

"I've plenty of time to kill you though." I don't mean the words; I just want to scare him. I've no idea if he's actually poisoned me, but as I utter the threat, I know with certainty I'll carry it through. No one's around and this sniveling rat of a poisoner doesn't deserve such a quick end as he'll get. If I am poisoned, I'll be too weak later, too doubled-over in pain to kill him.

It's done almost quicker than thought. He turns to run but his long legs are more hindrance than use and I trip him easily, kicking one foot against the other. He falls like a rag doll, making no effort to keep on his feet, and it's contempt at this weakness that sets my arm in motion. Standing bent over him, I swing the two sticks in my left hand easily, a bit like a golfer, I think, and hard enough that wind whistles through the tiny space between Orcrist and Mordor. The strike is precise enough to kill; I feel the rubbery give of his temple beneath the tip of my sticks. But once more shame comes on me, so suddenly I taste it mingling with the acid of vomit. I walk away without checking that he's dead. I feel weak again, the return of a fever.

A strange wind comes up that doesn't stir the bushes but pulls at my shorts, keens to me like a dead baby. I stand, clutching my head, afraid I'll fall if I try to walk. The dump suddenly doesn't seem empty after all. Boys are skulking all about, may even have seen me kill Tauzin, and they're just waiting for the right moment to ambush me. I would take one or two of them with me, and the certainty steadies me slightly. After some minutes, I begin walking again, with purpose. To find someone who never moves from his spot.

Aias is awake but looks like he's about to die; his eyes are gummy and he holds as ever the tell-tale plastic bottle in his dainty fingers. Aias looks like shit but his smile is that of a boy who loves the world. He used to be one of the very best stickfighters. One of only two legends we have in the dump. There are almost as many stories about him as about Turin. A champion with two sticks or with a single one. You were lucky if Aias fought you with a single stick; very good if he used two. It was before my time, though Aias cannot be older than seventeen. His smile is jolly, but only if you don't look too closely. He has all his teeth but they are very nearly black, the gums too.

"Aias," I whisper. It seems rude to speak normally around him, to disturb the sleepy peace of glue life. "Aias. Got any glue?" It takes him an aeon to look at me, to turn one muddy and one clear eye towards me. He's got the trembles. I wish I had food to offer him. The hand he extends shakes uncontrollably. He's never selfish with his glue. Involuntarily, I wipe the bottle mouth with my shirt, suck on it hard. There's not much left, barely any in fact. I suck a minute, taking small breaths through my nose and watching Aias turn his head as though it's buried in a slurry of mud. I feel a mixture of pity and stomping contempt before the warmth invades my mouth and throat. It would be easy to kill him, end his half-life, easier even than with Tauzin. I wouldn't even have to use my sticks, he's like a twig. One wrench would snap his neck. Up close his happy smile seems more a grin of pain. Glue's supposed to be a happy drug. It warms you, it's true, it's a help on cold nights. But it makes me think of blood. I get a bit twitchy on glue, my mind's full of gore. The longer you do it, the more it kills the brain, rots it, or those bits of the brain that make you fight. I suck so hard I get a headache with my warm feeling. I hand the bottle back to

him, trying not to gag at his stink. His feet are dotted with yellow shit specks. I walk away with a muzzy head, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other and clutching at the warmth spreading all the way to my fingertips. It feels like a layer on my skin and yet it's gotten beneath the surface at the same time, sending rays into my bones.

I almost bump heads with Markham. He steps back a pace as if to get a good look, says "you have your sticks, good. Salad thinks we should do a rematch." I think my answering nod is calm but he has a bad habit of catching me off guard. He spins and walks ahead. I follow, his two friends moving in to flank me so it feels like I have an honour guard. I clutch my sticks in anticipation. Markham's own sticks hang from the loops of his shorts; he looks ridiculous.

If anything, I start to feel warmer as I walk. When we find Salad my headache is gone. I'm swollen with energy, and even more eager than usual. More boys draw up. Salad has a few words with us, in a stern tone. He's tired than ever, and coughs hoarsely. His voice is normal and his muscles have the same rubbery hard look they always do. For the first time I notice he and I are almost the same height. His words bleed out of his mouth, I think because of the glue, and I hear nothing of what he says. I need to release the force building inside me. I can't let it escape before I finish Markham, and I know I will. Snarls echo in my head. Markham will never again challenge me.

I don't limber up; Markham eyes me, perhaps taking note of my confidence. I stand still to avoid wasting the killing essence in me; I don't want it to escape.

So that when Salad gives the signal I go for Markham harder, I think, than I've ever gone for anyone. He's ready though and our sticks swirl faster and more intricately than I've seen in some time. A trick of the glue makes them catch alight. My limbs are weightless and Mormegil, like its namesake, is keen to drink. No wrist blows, no knuckle raps. I go for his throat and he aims for my head. He'll tire before my supercharged arms so I swing and swing, using a good deal of my strength in each stroke. He sweats, I am dry and I watch his eyes dart about trying to follow my sticks.

He doesn't give ground, I admire that. I'm pressed up almost against him and not once does he hunt for space. But I have cunning too, and when the glue in my veins gives me the signal, I switch tactics. I swing with Orcrist a second too slowly, and he rises to the bait. His parry becomes harder, faster, he drives at my neck. I slip the blow, stepping back and aside, tilting my head ever so slightly so that it misses me. He tries to recover – he's almost as quick as I am – but there's time for me to smash the top of his earlobe, to parry his own return stroke and aim Mormegil's tip at his throat. Let the beast slake its thirst. He dives backward to escape, almost as though he's been hit. He thinks I'll give him time to regain his footing, but I don't. Instead I'm on him, and on his back he tries to sweep my leg with his foot just as I stab again, for his groin. Mormegil catches the inside of his thigh – the twisty fucker – and before I can strike again, with perfect accuracy this time, Salad's arm is in front of me, a barrier of muscle the size of my head. "Fight over," he announces, his voice coming from a long way off. "Raul wins." My skin tingles

with the remains of the glue's warmth. My arms, my body still hum with unused force. I close my eyes a second for calm but I cannot turn away. What happens must. I start to swing before my eyes open, I feel bold, so ready. The judge blocks with his forearm, as if he expects this. It must sting like hell even wrapped in muscle like that. His eyes are on mine without expression but the watching boys release a gasp of shock. I smile. They do not know it but I'm freeing them from the tyranny of authority. My next blow follows so hard on the heels of the first that Salad cannot possibly counter, and he doesn't. To his credit he only falls to one knee; I expected a hit on the temple would end him. Stunned, he's at the right height now for me to use maximum power and I hit him again cleanly across the nose. He keels forward not even putting out his hands to catch himself. I give him a chance to roll onto his back, but before I can pick my next spot, another blow lands. Markham's. He hits the judge's knee, a downward chop like an axe stroke, and then pokes at his crotch with the other stick. A spasm crosses Salad's face, the first one. He pulls himself into a ball, his knees up as I stab for his eyes. Markham is circling, looking for an opening, and it's like we're the only two alive in that place, the other boys are all frozen, so still as to be almost empty shells. Markham thrusts into his other eye and Salad's face splashes blood. He still makes no sound.

I'd dreamed of a killing blow, the single cut that cleanly ends life, but I've done that already, with Tauzin earlier. It was sweet. But now's not the time for precision. I swing and thrust, mindlessly raining blows, and Markham is with me, shares my aim for we club at the judge's head with no thought for accuracy. Even when he no longer moves, Markham and I swing for some minutes. Then I stop.