

# WORDS FROM THE STREET

Sunday June 26, 2016

## Jordan Thompson 3<sup>rd</sup> prize

### Swimming Lessons

I remember you,  
the way the trauma remembers me.  
Long gone but part of the kite strings that make up the veins that nourish the loneliness.  
"I love you" rattles around my empty chest, shattering windows to let in the light. But  
it is always way too much of never enough.

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I watch her floating on an air mattress in the lake, for hours. Her bobbing, sleeping figure growing smaller as she drifts away. My sisters and I are doing handstands on the shore. It's safe here. No treading water. No risk. The twins are whining that they're getting hungry and mom is nowhere to be seen. My aunt says we should be worried about her. The sun is starting to set and my 11 year old heart is in my throat. When we see her splashing toward us, we all get in the water to shout and cheer. We are screaming words of encouragement and she's yelling back, but we can't make it out. When she finally gets close enough I hear what she's been yelling... "Jordan! Help me! Swim out here and get me!" She shouts it over and over, each time with less desperation and more venom in her voice. She seems to forget, she never taught me to swim. I duck under the rope which divides the deep from the safety, keeping one hand securely attached to my life line. I'm on my tip toes and I can feel the cold lake water lapping at my ears, threatening to take me under. I am terrified of drowning but more afraid of the look of disgust on my mother's face as she watches my feeble attempt to reach out an arm to her. She's getting closer and now she's just screaming "Jordan get me! I'm going to die!" and I'm trying to yell back that I'm trying, but the water keeps filling my mouth and I panic and back further away. When she is finally within an arm's length, I reach out to help pull her the last few feet. As my tiny hand reaches up for her, she slaps it away and snaps "Don't touch me you selfish little bitch".

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A sliver of light and your footsteps on the stairs.  
Heart pounding against my ribs.  
Play possum.  
I don't recognize the face of your, clock.  
2 o'clock in the morning.  
Pulled from my warm bed.  
Standing at attention.  
Attention to detail.  
In your eyes I can see the warning.  
And then it happens. Lightning fast.  
I feel your hot breath on my neck as you pull the knife from my back,  
my safety dripping from its blade.

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I hang up the phone and go bounding up the stairs to the living room. My mom is watching the television and I know better than to interrupt but it is too late. My excited presence has already caught her attention. She takes a long drag of her cigarette and asks "What?"

The smoke swirls out of her mouth and dances in the air. My sister reaches up instinctively and waves it out of her face.

"I want to go to the preteen dance tonight" I say.

"No. You're staying home with your sisters."

"But I'm always home with them. Please?" I whine but I know that it will get me nowhere.

"We've been over this. You are here with the girls, or you can find your own place to live." She turns up the volume and I stand as still as I can. I hear someone say "I am going to this dance" and only recognise my own voice once my mom is already crossing the room toward me.

"Make the smart choice, kid. Or get out." She barks.

"I just want to be a kid! I just want to go with my friends. Please, mom?"

"Make your choice. Home with the girls or get out." She breathes.

"Out" I whisper.

When I return the next day, the locks have been changed and there is a note taped to the front door: "Good luck out there – Love Mom"

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A slight of hand and I am hooked.

Hooker.

"Yes" spills from my mouth like marbles from a jar. Loud and messy.

Child's play.

"No" burns in my belly but my body survives the blaze.

Dreams break like wrists, when they're twisted too far.

Desperation turns thirteen into slave and in the mourning there is wailing.

Sex worker to sexton.

My nails are bloody from digging up justifications. Six  
feet deep and still so shallow