

## Competing hors-série

The pain is diffused, but persistent, like a small dog's bite, whose teeth don't want to let go of your slowly bleeding ankle. Perhaps too embarrassed to acknowledge the feisty creature, you keep walking, only to trip over your own limping. You could stop but what if the throbbing, expanding pain, or maybe the dog at your ankle, mess you up so badly and that's it? No, you cannot stop. You must remain determined, driven, and moving. There is one pray you ought to consider. The pray of becoming invisible. You don't need anybody to call after you, or worse, scream at you,

“Hey, what's that cute, fluffy dog doing hanging down from your ankle? What? You have no clue what I'm talking about? Are you a moron? Look down. No? Stop then and I'll show you. No? That's animal abuse. I'll call 911, if you don't stop.”

Keep praying no one notices your long smooth legs with no protuberant veins or unshaved hair. The transparent polyester stalking further enhances the pleasure, directing it towards your knee-length skirt, a perennial size two, continued into a crisp off-white blouse capped with a silk scarf, the same shade of beige as the skirt. You look impeccable, as you have had for decades, except for your thoughts. You tremble as your imagination runs afoul and keep moving forward, or wobbling, in the absence of high heels. You don't even remember when you stopped wearing high heels, but perhaps this is not the moment to wonder. Shake your wavy blond hair, died in your natural color, and keep moving. The direction of your drive is less important. What matters most is the distance between you and your pain.

“I will leave that pain behind,” you naïvely think.

And suddenly you notice the time, or more accurately, its lack. There cannot be any lapse of time if there is no change you notice, and there is no change in your pain. It feels as if the pain's sole reason to exist is to follow you.

You still don't look down. The rabid, muffled noise-maker dog is tightly hanging on. You don't need to look down your leg and try to make eye-contact. Dogs cannot be shamed into stopping their actions. When have you last seen a dog shamed into stopping peeing on your leg? Neither can you stop pain by staring at it. Pain hides under cloths and behind your back, as if ready to encroach on your soul.

“Take it easy,” you hear some conversation, or maybe your own wishful thinking.

But, it's impossible. There would be no pain if you could ignore it, would it? Shall you try a diverting smile? When your mouth is getting ready to stretch, a reinvigorated pain encompasses your being and conquers your will to exist in a parallel universe. Pain is your halo, but perhaps there is a way of living other than soaked in it. What if you bow to it with humility?

“Did you understand the contractual terms of our interaction?” Now, that sounds imagined. Pain cannot talk. “Are you feigning surprise” And what if I were? What's wrong with that? “You've expected me all your life. I am not saying you were seeking my presence, or that you were imagining my companionship. I am only saying that you saw me coming and attacking you.” There is nothing else to be said, except to continue breathing, and sighing. “And here I am. I'm here to stay.”

“The pain seemed to have started with my calves, right above my left ankle,” your voice fills the hollow white-painted office.

Thinking about how to describe pain, a quilt comes to mind. Each inch of your body responds to pain in a different way. Your calves are stiff. Your knees are rigid as if metallic and covered in rust. Your thighs contract in nods. When you stand it’s as if your feet become your knees, and the metamorphoses takes place in the absence of any anesthesia. When you sit down your hips are volcanoes emptied of bubbling, hot, lava spewed out in eruptions just moments before.

“It’s not rheumatoid arthritis,” the orthopedist you consult tells you slowly as if you were a moron to have suggested it. “That’s a serious condition, and you don’t have it. Look at your hands.”

You look at your hands and they look fine. They are clean, a bit dry, but properly manicured, because your birthday was the other day. Then, you remember the labor you put in your appearance, so you don’t look your age. You make an effort, though you don’t really sweat to look, as they say it, “in-between ages.” Your belief is that if your hair’s done, your face looks properly made-up, and you maintain a decent body fat to weight ratio, you might qualify for the “in-between ages” look. Or what you wrongfully call “*hors-série*,” thinking about film festivals, where there are *hors-concours* entries, designated to offer movies which did not qualify for any specific award or accolade, a chance to be seen. Whatever movie does not deserve to be thrown out of competition all together, because it touched a jury member, or a sponsor, it’s run “*hors-concours*.” But you are in too much pain to think straight into your nonconformist knowledge baggage, and instead you think of the *hors-série* concept, and you find yourself reminiscing of the loneliness of a long-distance runner, of you.

“Your hands look fine,” the doctor’s words stated moments ago, but you heard “in-between ages.” Why?

Perhaps noticing your confusing, the doctor adds superiorly, “Your joints are not swollen, and neither are your fingers. You don’t have rheumatoid arthritis. It’s your back.”

“My back?” you ask from under the weight of bewilderment. “How can it be my back when my legs hurt?”

And the little rabid dog makes itself felt again. This time its presence seems larger and heavier. The pain is moving up your calves leaving marks in its way to take over your sitting prism: the space connecting your leg to the hip. The pain jumps around and then recedes only to resurface full of energy. And then you connect your metaphor with yourself. Your wear and tear and the slowdown put you in-between ages. At first you thought you were afraid of acknowledging the inevitable slowdown. But that’s phony. There is no slowdown, only misdirected and misspent energy. Suddenly you’re part of your own “*hors concours*” short movie, where pain is moving up and down your body with no speed limit like the most ostentatious Ferrari, making no stops, only taking fast, abrupt turns and causing moments of out-of-breath. You’re breathless and though not really out of the regular competition, you’re playing now in a different, special category, soon to be custom-built through cuts and pastes, and new pieces replacing the used parts, which sometimes cannot be replaced, like transistors or light bulbs with filament. And it finally dawns upon you that a relic can be both “*hors-série*,” and “*hors-concours*,” and in that brief moment everything has reached its potential: it’s funny and intriguing and bearable.

“Shall we go with six weeks of intense physical therapy or shall we do the MRI first?” you hear the orthopedist. You accept his pushing that little dog out of the way and let him temporarily take control of your journey.