The Ring

By: Elyse Giaimo

“I’m afraid. I don’t know what to do when it happens,” I sob into the receiver.

Her voice advises, unwittingly, “Just step out of the ring.”

A common affliction in boxers is chronic traumatic encephalopathy; brain atrophy. They become punch drunk. Some even go deaf. Repeated blows, similarly, have dulled my senses, made me mute.

Years before dialing for help, I was alone on a beach in winter, barefoot. Sand is less abrasive chilled. It’s powdery, like flour on a countertop. Wind was making the brittle dune grass talk in a kind of crispy whisper.

The shore was bare and neutral, begging me to color it in, to think of summer. Still myself, imaginative and happy, I drew tan teenagers with red coolers, babies rosy in the cheeks, the frothy shift of navy water, and every bright hue of towel and umbrella.

He stood on the boardwalk, looking handsome and harmless. I didn’t know him well yet. He was hesitating because he didn’t want sand in his sneakers. I motioned him forward and he took the shoes off, peeled his socks away.

White-knuckling the phone, I want to speak about that pivotal moment, the last time I could have escaped. Before he stepped on the beach and took my hands. I try, but fail, to describe how I pointed to the rainbows that I was painting over cold, dull spots. How he told me I looked beautiful smiling in sunshine, there was a salty kiss, and I was charmed, trapped. Weakly, instead, I agree to try stepping out.

In 1743 Jack Broughton developed a code of conduct for boxing. Broughton wanted to reform his sport because, with bare knuckles and without boundaries, he had killed an opponent.

I hang up and walk toward a place with no rules, toward home.