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Sleep in Me

Jon Pineda
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The defining moment of a young boy's life is usually not associated with a teenage sister except perhaps when her horribly disabling accident cripples a boy's ability to retain an unburdened outlook of the world.

Jon Pineda turns a simmering lens on his tween and teen years as his family, splintered and stoic, copes with the aftermath of his sister's incapacitation and demise. In *Sleep in Me*, Pineda explores, rather than resolves, whether such trauma made him stronger or simply more attuned to heartbreak.

From the opening lines, Pineda expertly nails the cocky, untested voice of his pre-accident youth, a kid poised between skimming rocks and sneaking Playboys, concerned with nothing much. Then the unreality of his sister's abruptly broken life intrudes, becomes the hideously normal backdrop, and that voice shifts with precision as he navigates uncertain new terrains of shame, fear, deep love, hope, and resignation. The author searches for his lost wonder, grapples with himself on the high school wrestling mat, and grasps for his place between divorced parents. He swings from guilt, wanting to escape his sister's constant need and the pain of witnessing her cruel deformity, to the enticing freedom of striking out elsewhere.

Pineda, who's published two poetry books, brings the poet's hand to the prose. "I want to be different. I want it to be different, and at the same time, I feel the same hold. Each time I take a breath, the invisible arms tighten. If I'm not careful, my breath will leave me for good."

He's also skilled at raw observation, here lamenting how his sister's tragic story was preamble to most conversations. "That was supposed to mean that we were linked together somehow, in the way small towns worked hard to foster a social hierarchy, our destinies predetermined by those in our family who had come before us. My problem within this fate was that a story of tragedy preceded me wherever I went."

To say this is the story of how that tragedy affected the author is to miss perhaps half the point. Pineda probes further, toying with questions of loss, identity, and transformation, all tinged with the awful awareness that forever in this boy—now man's—life, is a line separating before, when his sister's smile could light his face, and after, when to look at his sister's face meant to behold a freakish hell.

LISA ROMEO (August 16, 2010)

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