

body language

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Body Language

BY KELLY MAGEE

2006 WINNER, KATHERINE ANNE PORTER PRIZE IN SHORT FICTION



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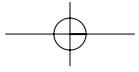
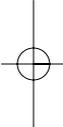
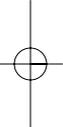
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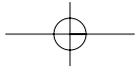
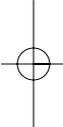
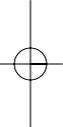
For my family
And especially, for Lauren



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acknowledgments



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body language



Here is Lucha: on the last night of the Plant City Strawberry Festival, she's watching the Ferris wheel, the one thing she can see from the highway, blink lavender and gold over cars of outstretched hands. Once her dad has parked the Dodge, she can see more: whirling lights and lines of kids. Food stands and bulb-lit ticket booths. This is her first Strawberry Festival, the final hurrah before her family leaves Florida for the onions in Georgia, the tobacco in North Carolina, the pickle-cucumbers in Ohio. Until this year, she's been dropped off at a neighbor's house while her dad, her stepmother Suzie, and her two brothers wave from the windows and drive away. But this year she is ten, and exactly one hour ago she'd stomped the second-hand ballerina slippers Suzie insisted she try on, and told

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her father she was old *enough*. Now she stands, still in her pink slippers, before lighted signs for the Zipper and the Adrenaline Drop, the Steel Eel, the Hurricane. She's been practicing her English the whole way from the trailer park, whispering to the back of her father's seat while her brothers—dropped off at the gate—laughed. But in the parking lot, Lucha is speechless. She's picturing the moment when she will belt herself in and take off down the track, neck whipping backwards, hands flush to the sky.

Her father and Suzie unpeel themselves from the car. Suzie, Lucha knows, has only come for the food. She's been talking about it all week. Tomorrow the family will pile into the car, their mattresses strapped on top, and drive eight hours north to another field of ankle- or knee- or waist-high plants, and they'll spend another six months picking food for other people's dinner plates. But tonight, they'll eat. Here, strawberries come in as many ways as you can dress them: in cream, chocolate-dipped, on-a-stick. Cooked in butter, rolled in sugar. Frozen, freeze-dried, caramelized, canned. Lucha's brothers ignored Suzie, but while Lucha doesn't like her stepmother either, something about the way Suzie said "strawberry pie" made Lucha want to be nicer to her. Now Suzie and her father are joining hands, her father patting the bulge of wallet in his pocket like just for tonight, he's a rich man.

Suzie pats the corners of her mouth with a 7-Eleven napkin. Lucha inhales deeply the humid air. Beyond her, the enormity, the flexed muscle, the bend of the moving rides.

Music starts. Crowds balloon.

Lucha's father picks the Tilt o'Whirl for them to ride first, and Lucha forgives him for coming along when he lowers the bar into her lap, leans over, and says, "Éste es mi favorito." As the ride lurches forward, she laughs, fists clenched around the silver bar, kicking out one leg at a time. Her father is crushed against her one minute, sliding away in a lump the next. He howls when they

spin past a line of people holding tickets, a white tent with a sign for Chinese Acrobats, Suzie nipping a fried turkey drumstick. The car creaks. Lucha removes one hand from the bar and holds it near the side of her face, not exactly in the air, but close. She touches the bar lightly with the other hand, then lifts it, too. Her father's hair blows back from his forehead. He glances down at her, raises his own hands from the bar. Together, they skate back and forth across the seat.

The bar rattles loosely, and then, after one gut-wrenching swivel, the pressure of eight festival nights causes a nail to bend, a clasp to slip free of its sleeve. The lock opens, and the safety bar swings free. There's a moment of sickening release before gravity pins Lucha and her father to the back of the seat. Lucha's father catches her shoulders. He braces his cowboy boots against the floor her feet don't yet reach and shouts for the attendant to stop the ride. The air is close in their faces, and the other cars fly maniacally around them. Lucha is breathless. She's the youngest in her family, and the only girl, so all her life people have fussed over her, belting and barring her in, catching her in child restraints and life preservers, keeping her back with lame excuses: "Sorry, Lucha, maybe when you're eleven." She's half-terrified, half-exhilarated. She wishes her father would let go. That the attendant would speed the ride up.

The Tilt o'Whirl unwinds, finally, but Lucha's eyes move in circles long after she's on solid ground. She steadies herself on Suzie's skirt fold while her father curses the ride attendant in English.

"Cheap American metal," he yells, flecks of spit hitting the boy's face.

"It ain't my fault," the boy says, towering over her father, red apron overflowing with used tickets, and he keeps saying this until her father turns his knotted brow, kicks the ground with a cowboy boot, and leaves.

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“See?” he says to Lucha, as if this wins an argument they’ve not yet had. “See?”

Suzie looks down at Lucha, her upper lip thick with turkey drippings. Lucha doesn’t like Suzie because she spends all the family’s money, but Suzie has made it clear she doesn’t care what Lucha thinks. Suzie buys curlers and soda, and department store underwear, and hair extensions, but when she tries to extend Lucha’s hair, Lucha screams. So instead, Suzie tells Lucha to comb her hair, and cuff her jeans, and didn’t she think it’d be easier to change her name to Lucy? Now Suzie holds out a thigh bone, picked clean. “Bite?” she says.

Ten minutes later, though her father is still talking about the Tilt o’Whirl, Lucha is all eyes for the Mamba. It’s a wooden roller coaster—two loops and a screaming tunnel. A wind lifts out of the ground, buoys dust and wrappers and farm smells at Lucha’s feet when she begs her father to let her ride. The purr of the Mamba is in her mouth. She uses English words, some of which her father won’t understand.

“Pida Suzie si ella va con tu,” he says, waving her away, but before Lucha can even balk, Suzie is eyeing the line and shaking her head.

“Not me,” she tells Lucha, licking the nuts from a caramel apple. “I’m not waiting in all that.”

The line stretches backwards clear to the popcorn stand, dotted with cowboy hats, farmhands, pockets of pierced kids not much older than Lucha sporting mohawks and cussing at each other, smoking and lighting bits of paper on fire. Lucha wishes her father and Suzie would go to the country music stand, leave Lucha to sashay up to the girl with hair in pink cones, eyes and boots rimmed silver, a chain running from her left ear to a ring through her eyebrow. Lucha would ask the girl if she could cut in line. She watches the girl talk, thinking that she would change her name to Lucy if only she could taste the girl’s cigarette. She’d

press her lips around the filter, the way women in the trailer park did, *nasty girls*, Suzie said, *and you better hope you don't turn out like that*. Lucha would force her tongue to pronounce the words without accent: *shit, damn, motherfucker, cowfucker, bitch*. Her jaw moves to the rhythm already, her tongue flat against the roof of her mouth. At school, girls like this made fun of her, mimicked her r's, her sibilant s's. Lucha scores better on vocabulary tests than they do, but she cannot force the words from her mouth the proper way. They call her *spic*, and her teacher corrects them. *Spanish*, she says, and though Lucha can pick Spain out on the map, she's never been there. Lucha likes the other word, the bad one, lips pursed like a kiss, then tongue hard against the back of her throat. This is what the ESL teacher in her last school taught her: feel where your tongue is. Put it in the right place. "Your language is based on rhythm," the teacher had said, tapping her heart. "English is all in the mouth."

Inside the Showcase Tent, where Lucha's father has dragged them, Grupo Vida belts out Tex-Mex melodies that are the consistency of soggy tortilla chips. Lucha's father claps along and tries to swing Suzie on his arm, but Suzie shoos him away with a fried cheese stick. She's studying the awards case, trophies for the baby race, the swine weigh-in, the Strawberry Queen. When Lucha tries to look, Suzie tells her not to bother.

"They don't even let girls like us on the Strawberry Court," Suzie says, "let alone the Queen. Once, a long time ago, they let a black girl in. She was a Duchess, I think."

Lucha knows Suzie is wrong. Her skin is dark, like her father's, but it's not called black here. Those are other girls, with their own sets of names. Suzie buys big jars of SPF 30 sunscreen she tries to get Lucha to rub on her arms. Her hair is bottled blonde and permed, swept back in a turquoise clip. She wears bright lime-colored scarves and hot pink blouses. Lucha's father

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says Suzie is his tropical bird. But Lucha has never seen Suzie like this: running a finger over the photograph, the crown, then lightly touching the top of her own head.

“It turned out she was illegal,” Suzie says. “She got deported.”

“Who cares about the court?” Lucha says by way of camaraderie, but Suzie’s face stiffens.

“What do you know?” she says. Then, “Tie your slipper.”

Suzie reaches toward Lucha’s shoe, but she moves too fast, and without command, Lucha’s fist shoots from her side, nailing Suzie right in the gut.

Suzie recoils, startled, her mouth open in pain. Lucha drops her hands automatically, like if they’re at her sides no one can accuse her of doing anything, thinking anything. Suzie glares at her, and Lucha guesses that Suzie is thinking of the letters from teachers, the voices of other parents: *Lucha hits*. She hits fast and with severity, she hits before she has time to think, she hits like there’s something in it for her. She hits because it is the one language in which she can make herself perfectly understood.

She hits, but she also bites, if she has time. It’s the only thing she can rely on her mouth to do well. She counts her teeth by biting her own forearm. When she bites kids at school, her tongue moves up and back, the tip hanging suspended in the dead center of her mouth, the same way it does when she says “Hi” to the girls who call her *spic*. The same way it does when she whistles. She tries not to lick the kids she bites; she doesn’t like the way they taste.

Lucha, she has heard teachers decide, is hard to manage.

That thought, and worse, is in Suzie’s glare. Suzie glances behind her, at where Lucha’s father is clapping, but Suzie knows better than to make a scene. If Lucha’s father were to come over, he would laugh and say, “That Lucha is a feisty one.” Then he’d take her outside, like he always takes her from school, and buy her

something: a strawberry float. Lucha waits, almost interested in what Suzie will do next.

The waiting is a dare. Suzie accepts.

Suzie reaches out like she might pat Lucha's shoulder, if she were a patting kind of woman, grabs the skin where a breast might be, and pinches. This gesture, Lucha knows, has a name like a ride: a Titty Twister.

Lucha recoils, pain shooting through to her shoulder. "Bitch," she says. She cups her breast, and Suzie holds her stomach. They stare at each other.

Grupo Vida putters out, one maraca at a time, leaves a silence still as the gleaming trophies. In the bleachers, Lucha's father applauds. He stamps his feet, demands more, but the noise isn't loud enough to mask the emptiness of the Showcase Tent. Suzie wheels around to the trash can, drops her licked-clean stick into it, and wanders over to Lucha's dad.

"Lucha says she wants to go home," she says in Spanish, just loud enough for Lucha to hear.

"What about the fireworks?" her father says.

"She's too tired," Suzie says. She glances back at Lucha, who is watching with gritted teeth.

"I am not," Lucha shouts.

Suzie turns her back on Lucha. "Maybe we could take her to the kiddie rides," she says.

One of the Grupo members, a tall man with soap-colored skin, winks at Lucha as he exits the stage. He points at her feet, says, "Are you a dancer?" He is huge, leathery, horsey. His feet are pigeon-toed, his eyes yellow. When she doesn't answer, he repeats his question in Spanish.

Lucha clamps her teeth and stares hard. Then she uses another kind of language she is sure he'll understand. She raises her arm and extends her middle finger.

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Across the tent, her father's gasp echoes. "Lucha," he hisses. "You see what I mean?" Suzie says, looking right in Lucha's eyes. "Lucha is a lost cause."

The exotic petting zoo is a poor replacement for the Mamba, but it's the one place her father will let her go alone. The wooden gate smacks behind her as she enters. Her father stands on the other side of the fence, cradling a llama muzzle in his hands. Lucha has a quarter's worth of food pellets in hers, too much to hold. She drops some with every step.

"Lucha," her father yells. "Use both hands."

But she's already letting more fall through her fingers, attracting a gray goat with white eyebrows. Her father beams. This is the kind of picture he loves, has pointed out to Lucha in commercials and picture books: a girl in a white dress, feeding sheep on a hillside. There is no white dress. There is no hillside. The animals in the petting zoo are llamas with matted fur, kangaroos with desperate eyes, a giraffe with parasites. But Lucha performs for her father, anyway, in the hopes of softening him up—she's still hoping for a chance at the Mamba. She feeds the goats a finger-scoop of brown pebbles, and they wander close to her, then away. Earlier, she'd watched as a kid tried to set a goat free, holding open the gate and offering it a chicken bone. Now the goat is on its knees, straining to reach someone's cup near the fence post. Hooves slice through piles of their own waste, scummy teeth strip splinters from the fence posts and chew. The smell is distinctly animal, distinctly caged. Miniature horses trot corner to corner nervously, stepping on chickens, laying out goats, their shorn manes twisting until the petting zoo attendant wrangles them into individual pens. "Must be the weather," he says, tipping a ball cap and curling his lip.

The goats are greedy; one almost takes her finger off. A line of blood appears on the crease of her pinkie. The giraffe won't

respond to anyone, and several men—including Lucha's father—joke that it's died on its feet. While her father is yucking it up over the giraffe, a kid sneaks up behind Lucha and pokes her shoulder blade. Lucha reels, hackles rising on her neck, but the boy leaps out of hitting range and sticks out his jaw. He wears a festival T-shirt and a safari hat with a speckled feather in the band. The toes of his boots curl upward, as if they're brand new.

"What's the matter with you?" he says.

"Nothing."

"What happened to your finger?"

Lucha looks down at her blood-dripping finger, holds it higher for the boy to see. She says, "Your stupid goat."

"Your stu-peed goat," the boy mimics, the words sliding over his teeth: he's making fun of her accent. He kicks the ground with his boot until he's made a hole, then bends over to wipe the dirt from the toe. "It's not mine," he says. "It's my uncle's." He points to an attendant draped over the wooden gate, talking to Lucha's father. The uncle smacks the giraffe on its haunches, and it jumps. The men laugh. Lucha hates them all, in this moment. Even her father. Especially her father.

The uncle smacks the giraffe again, and Lucha wills it to rear up, bare its yellow teeth, wrap its neck around the uncle's throat and squeeze. She wants the giraffe to find its legs, clear the fence, give the men what for. Instead, it looks like it might buckle. The legs hold, but shakily, and Lucha feels her cut begin to burn. She doesn't want to look at her father, so she watches the roller coaster instead. The Mamba is soaring, cars rattling on the wooden track. The boy follows her eyes.

"You ride that yet?" he says.

Lucha squeezes her finger so more blood oozes out.

"I got a friend who works there," the boy says. "He'd let you on, even if you're too short."

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Lucha looks back at her father, his laughing face among all the other laughing faces. Suzie is drinking a soda, picking paint off the gate. Neither of them pays attention to her. They expect her to stay here, a good girl, with the babies and caged animals.

She follows the boy to the back of the petting zoo. She drops the feed in her hand, and it scatters like marbles. One by one, the goats come with their spare tire bellies, their flaking horns, their mouths parted to the ground. She does not look back. No one stops her.

Lucha latches the gate behind her.

The line for the Mamba goes underneath the roller coaster: rotting wood, bleakness, more hazy than dark. Yellow-green clots of light dangle from naked bulbs suspended by electrical cords from the scaffolding; their centers teem with mosquitoes. This reminds Lucha of the haunted house in a semi-truck that comes to the trailer park on Halloween. The air is congested. Lucha waits with the boy among throngs of kids, some of them French kissing, some smoking. Little boys run through the line, tripping and smacking their faces on the ground. The older kids laugh. They snake through the roped-off line, passing each other, watching each other.

“Hey,” a blonde boy yells to Lucha. “¿Yo habla espaniol?”

He toys with a girl’s collar; she grips his waistband. Lucha and her boy are silent. Above, the Mamba rushes by in a fury of sparks and noise. The track lists, trembles. Lucha memorizes the scene: the sound of her teeth grinding. The moonstruck dazzle above. The invisible breathing and blinking of the hot bodies around her—their stillness, their dead weight.

A breeze kicks up, and Lucha feels the grit on her neck. Then it is the boy, his breath behind her ear. She pushes him away, but in a minute he’s back, holding her shoulders, pressing into them.

He smells like the goats. “Quit it,” Lucha says. She pushes hard, but not as hard as she can—she doesn’t want to be sent away for fighting. He steps backward, stumbles into a girl, a teenager, sitting on the rail in a section of line behind them. The girl turns, catches him around the neck. She looks at Lucha with ice blue eyes, rock-hard hair.

“He bothering you?” she says, and Lucha nods.

“You bothering her?” she asks the boy, and he shakes his head.

“I had the same problem with my stepdad,” the girl says to her friends. “I called it sexual harassment. He called it parenting.”

Her friends chuckle, and Lucha isn’t sure if the laughter is directed at her, or the boy, or themselves. The girl blows Lucha a kiss before she jumps down from the rail and moves away with the line. Lucha circles by her several more times, and every time, the girl does something different: smiles crookedly, sticks out her tongue, makes an obscene gesture with her fingers and her mouth. Lucha isn’t sure if she should smile, but she does anyway. The boy ignores her completely. His arms when they enter the darkest part of the line are white-blue, like detergent, the night foaming around them. Lucha’s heels dig into the dust with each step, as if she’s fighting for ground. As if the line, and the boy with it, might move on without her. She holds her spot, her square of Lucha-space, arms stretched so her hands reach the rails on either side of her. They laugh at her, the flashing, winking older kids, but they do not dare shove her aside.

The top of the steps yields the entrance to the ride. Here, even the apathetic, the cynical, entertain a jolt of excitement. The cars are shaped like rockets. Silver bodies, yellow tails, cherry red noses. Two across, four per car, ten cars to a train. Lucha watches kids vie for the front seat: a girl with black lipstick, a boy in a white bandanna. There is a jumble of words over the loudspeaker,

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an automated voice announcing rules and restrictions—*pregnant women should not* and *people with high blood pressure*—and an enormous digital timer counts down from ten.

The line thrusts forward, pulling Lucha through the turnstile that spills her onto the platform, and then she's in front of the ride. There's a moment of confusion where everyone gets to choose which car they want. The boy wins a spot in the front seat by elbowing a little kid, and he claims his prize triumphantly. They are separated, then. Lucha has been too slow, and must wait for the next round. She chooses an empty slot, four cars from the front. The boy in the front car surges forward without her, catapulting into the night beyond the doors. She wonders if he'll tell on her when he gets back.

When Lucha turns, the next train—her train—is nosing down the track. It is love at first sight.

An attendant comes by, telling everyone to step behind the red line, and he pauses over Lucha. He has a yardstick in one hand. Lucha looks away, hoping he'll move on.

"How tall are you?" he asks.

Before Lucha can think of an answer, there is disorder behind her. "Wait," someone is yelling, and for a moment Lucha thinks it's Suzie, come to take her away. "I'm with her," the voice says, and it is the girl with blue eyes shoving her way forward, catching Lucha's arm. "I'm her cousin."

Lucha tries not to grin. She gazes innocently at the boy and nods.

The dense night. The safety bar heavy in her lap. Lucha rigid in the seat, a girl's ponytail cutting the air in front of her, her pink slippers untied, the seat of her pants cold. The boy is somewhere on the ground by now, maybe back at the petting zoo, maybe winning a plush penguin by throwing darts, or rings, or basketballs.

But Lucha is flying. Jaw set, eyes wet with wind, she's allowing the girl next to her to unclasp her hands from the bar, straighten her elbows, reach upward with her whole body. She lifts out of her seat on the first loop, and but for the bar she'd be falling. She points her toes, spreads her fingers. The festival is a mishmash of light and ride—the teacups, the octopus, the swings—but she finds that if she concentrates she can see the detail around her, places where the chains are rusting away, the names carved into the seats.

At the top of the third hill, the coaster slams to a stop. The kids in front of her turn their windblown heads from side to side, crane over the edges of their cars, spit and catcall below. Lucha lowers her hands slowly. She glances at the girl beside her.

“What’s your name?” the girl says.

Lucha is stiff-tongued and tight-lipped. “Lucy,” she tries in her best accent. “I’m not Spanish.”

“Me, neither.” The girl grins, full-mouthed, revealing a row of glossy teeth. She reaches deep into her jeans and withdraws a pack of cigarettes. Marlboros, two r’s, a difficult name. She shakes one out as the wind picks up, bends trees nearer to the rides. They sit for five minutes, then ten. Lucha asks the girl if it was true, what she said about her stepdad. The girl nods.

“I would’ve beat him up,” Lucha says.

“Yeah?” the girl says.

“I punched my stepmom,” Lucha says.

The girl props her arm on the side of the car and tilts her head to look at Lucha from one eye. “You’re pretty tough,” she says.

Lucha smiles.

“Was that your boyfriend back there?” the girl says, and Lucha stops smiling. She shakes her head. The girl inhales deeply. “Yeah,” she says, “you didn’t look very into him.”

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"I'm not," Lucha says. "I'm not into him."

"He was sure into you." She stretches her thin arms, leans over the side, and spits.

"He wanted to kiss me," Lucha says. Then she feels embarrassed, like a little kid. But the girl doesn't seem to notice. She sighs.

"Just wait. Pretty soon, that'll be the least of your problems."

Lucha must look confused, because when the girl glances over again, she does a double take. "Hold on," she says, slapping her hand on Lucha's leg. "Have you ever done that? Kissed someone?"

Lucha stares at the hand on her leg. Wishes the ride would start.

"It's easy," the girl says, situating herself as if for a long explanation. Then she leans in, tips Lucha's chin up with a single finger. "Start with your lips," she says, speaking into Lucha's mouth, "and then your tongue." Lucha feels the girl's tongue worming its way into her mouth, sending shock waves through Lucha's body. The kiss is fast, instructive, but when the girl leans back, Lucha feels winded. With the girl's mouth on hers, she'd felt adept, controlled. She wants it to happen again.

Instead, the girl peers over the side at the people gathering below them. Several minutes pass in silence. "So, Lucy," the girl finally says, "I'm sick of this. How about you?" Before Lucha can say yes, the girl throws off the safety bar. "Let's get out of here."

Lucha thinks she will follow this girl anywhere, but when she looks over the side, she feels dizzy. In the crowd, she spots her father and Suzie, peering up at the cars, trying to pick her out. Beyond them, in the distance, the slow movement of the petting zoo.

The boy, she knows, has ratted her out.

"Lucy? You coming?" the girl says, halfway onto the track.

"You can't climb down," Lucha says. "You're not allowed."

“Watch me,” the girl says, and her face disappears below. Lucha leans over the car, watching the girl take the stairs two at a time, then flinging herself over the edge. She disappears into the festival. On the other side, Lucha notices her father pointing up at her, saying something to Suzie.

When the fireworks start, Lucha is still sitting suspended over the festival. She senses ears turning with the wind. Hairs rising. In the petting zoo, she can just make out the ponies, running like things possessed, like if they only went fast enough. If. A flock of birds rockets from a nearby banyan tree, like shattered pieces of the same animal.

The explosions of the fireworks are nearly enough to shake the cable cars from the sky, to tip the loops of the Mamba on its side. Lucha looks for the girl, can't find her. She removes her slippers, one by one. Tosses them over the edge and watches them spiral to the ground. Then, satisfied, she replaces the safety bar. She waits for the ride to start again.

When it does, Lucha's eyes are closed. She is kissing the air, first with her lips, then her tongue. She finds, suddenly, that it's easy to control her mouth. Just before the machinery catches and the ride shoots forward, she makes her lips do it again.