

In Enzo Silon Surin's stellar debut, we find a child cornered on corners, elegy distilled from eulogy, unnerving music after a certain numbness, fury after pain. Everywhere there is the evidence of a body done wrong: poverty mounts on violence, shaping the hand into a fist ready to strike. Yet this book is also profoundly lyrical, sensitive, and altogether loving. Surin's eloquence deserves recognition: these poems are exquisitely crafted. Moreover, *When My Body Was A Clinched Fist* is a deeply important contribution to our national conversation about gun violence.

—CATE MARVIN, author of *Oracle*

In this full-length debut, Enzo Silon Surin traverses the turns of coming of age in the New York of the 1990s. In these sonically-packed stanzas, Surin draws scenes where hip hop and Haiti flow through the borough of Queens. He elegizes a friend named Frankie, and interrogates how masculinity is so often flexed like the knuckles of an ever-ready fist, even when vulnerability pulses underneath.

—TARA BETTS, author of *Break the Habit*

*When My Body Was A Clinched Fist* emerges as a significant marker in the reimagining of African American culture. Enzo Silon Surin's poetry brings an honest lyricism to the body of work by people

of African descent that began in the eighteenth century in a country that struggles to realize its ideals. His delicate unveiling of hurt and courage are the American story in miniature. A young boy from Haiti leaves the dangers of home to confront the unknown dangers of a new home. Surin is the poet as warrior priest, his work the prophet's homily redefining what it means to become and be an American.

—AFAA M. WEAVER,  
author of *Spirit Boxing*

*When My Body Was A Clinched Fist* is born out of ultimate pain. Enzo Silon Surin weaves his words, like he weaves through trauma, with vulnerability, grace, and radical resilience. His writing is clearly an intrapsychic reckoning, with wounds and scars deeper than anyone ever wants to ever fathom, and too, a love song to finding home again within one's mind, body, and brain. The reader is gifted with this journey, which is a redemptive one at its core.

—JENNIFER R. WOLKIN, PhD, Licensed  
Psychologist & Clinical Neuropsychologist

When  
My Body  
Was A  
Clinched  
Fist

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# When My Body Was A Clinched Fist

Enzo Silon Surin



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Finally, this is for my heart foundation, my family. You are the reason for my open hand.

*for New York City*  
&  
*for Greg, Frankie*

In the case of acute trauma, there are “hardwired  
*emergency responses*  
that call upon our basic survival instincts  
in the face of a threat. These fixed action patterns  
including bracing, contracting, retracting, fighting . . .”

—Peter A. Levine, PhD,  
*Trauma and Memory*

# Birth of A Clinched Fist

Born in epidemic—circa 1986 Jamaica,  
Queens—when tiny white caps filled—  
modern-day cotton—moored most under

a parking lot's dim cone of light—when  
paraded in chambers of those born to triggers  
was that sin which weaned father

from son; tricked out the best in us—  
a resilient few kept from boxes,  
though what was left was worsted in haze

4

on those horrid nights—when what was  
promissory was plight was norm,  
and what was dealt—mnemonic so strong

I kept it in my mind like one rehearsing  
lines in an orograph for pain—  
a pain, like bait, that turned gain

into the cleanest demise—when I stood  
to cleave it, the fight empty as cavity,  
the strife—marked by omission. Everything

I saw was enemy—even this face, fair game.

# I

These changes explain why traumatized individuals become hypervigilant to threat at the expense of spontaneously engaging in their day-to-day lives.

—BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, M.D.,  
*The Body Keeps the Score*

It is another place and you are not what you were but as though emerging from the air, you slowly show yourself as someone else.

—RUTH STONE,  
“This Strangeness in My Life”

Thrown in the corner. Turned inside out.  
What is indispensable and what is less so  
Thrown on top of one another.

—RADMILA LAZIC,  
“Anthropomorphic Wardrobe”

# Elegy for One Sixty-First Street

Five furious years after Grandmaster Flash  
penned a rap about edges, you zigzagged  
the corners on runs for Benson and Hedges,

back when the zeitgeist of the block was crack  
and your father had that used pale-blue Pontiac  
he would dash the family into on Friday nights

trying to counter the myopic pull of the block's  
high danger of dope fiends and the debilitating  
euphoria in a whimsical gaze waylaid like mazes.

6

You sat in the back seat and uttered under  
your breath *why would anyone ever trade in  
nights under palms trees for these qualm nights,*

*for the menacing overtone of a smile without teeth?*

Because you've come to learn the most important  
lesson is to master your own gaze, and strut, for

the days when soon enough you'd be spit back  
onto the same strip of block where twice  
a woman with eyes belonging to that dragged out

and quintessential gaze proffered you an act of  
fellatio for five dollars. You were ten years old  
on an errand to buy milk in a flagitious galaxy

but carried the weight of her bid on all future  
quests to the grocery store, when the concrete  
sparkled like a sky full of stars under your feet.

You were grateful for the drift of Friday nights,  
when street telemetry took a back seat to the only  
sign of life, a magnificent breeze against your face.

# Corners

Outside Papi's Bodega, young boy in  
summer's native garb—white tank-top,

doorag's a smooth blue crown garnishing  
the stubbles of a week-old fade—regulates

a stereo knob while sitting shotgun  
in a chromed-wheel Escalade—the ghost

of Tupac Shakur magnified in a sub-  
woofer like an opus—as long as

∞ music's kept *all's good where we come  
from*. If only a glare didn't easily stumble—

if only manhood wasn't tenured with black  
powder in metal capsules, brown boys, free

to chase arcade mortality, wouldn't have to  
warily long for a ghetto's heaven or if grief,

inherited each day they step into the a.m.,  
would follow them into an afterlife.

But corners often treble the soul, a cold hope  
in the fold & on Winthrop and Thorndale

the sidewalk pleats, stumbles a man in hooded sweat-  
shirt and blood-sodden jeans, fresh breaths

breaching his lungs—if only keeping eyes off  
the karma and on the prize was what made this

world go 'round, it would be what was always  
wanted—any landscape better than what's here

—where on most nights, a native glare renders  
a chamber empty as winter flower boxes.

# Born to Triggers

Long before the recoil,  
at the sound of gunfire  
the body tucked and ran

as if the volleyed pre-text  
of trauma already vetted  
your legs—not certain of

the way—away or toward  
the mass—the riot within  
the riot within—you ran

10

until *don't run, they'll shoot*  
*you!* interrupted the assault—  
hard asphalt 'gainst your feet.

You were nine and did not  
know the body was capable  
of such things on its own or

the catalog it would amass  
in the nine subsequent years  
when you'd surmise: some

days the body is a clinched fist,  
at other times it is a doorknob  
leading out and, there is no

such thing as a real shortcut  
to the way back home—dis-  
covering, when bullets or fists

come, one momentary hiding  
after another—the first tuck  
knuckling its way into the next.

# Letters to A Young Fist

#

Caution begins with summer's opening  
—front stoop's clatter a family reunion:  
slaw and fish fries—clacks of dominos  
and c-low finger snappers on a deck—  
little girls' double-dutched cackling  
sidewalked—ice cream truck rocks its bells  
attuned like a good friend's record making  
its way down the street. And what is more:  
week incites a Correctional release—fuse's  
a vengeful chump—fallout, matter-of-course:  
headlights eclipse—your sect called out—  
from the barrow of a stoop, chrome's broadcast:

12

brace yourself—a whole new day un-caged  
—your best friend no longer needs his name.

#

The elegance of white tank-tops—gone  
—a body's wailing authors calm to riot  
as tymbals of Cicadas roar torrentially,  
muffling last gasps—friend's last gasps,  
a phantom reach. What the mouth devours  
under a fallible street lamp—silence. His

absence will be the silence of resting soil.  
A barrel-n-hammer rancor awaits you—  
number of squeezes, unknown. How swift  
the brass tacks' delivered to your brain  
primes the next step—bands the parts of you  
left—a gruff truth: love calls for counterblow.

Riddled with fought-living is thug-life. And re-  
venge ≠ redress, nor is proof of anybody's love.

#

It's what corners do—swelter—when  
in custody of breath-takers—slugs, slugs...  
Read the headlines verbatim—the names  
at edge's front page are all names you know  
by heart—you pushed weight with them—  
c-notes brought all sorts of appeal—now  
poised for retribution, your palms moist  
as mouths—this story is narrated only  
with caskets, fought-written—another truth:  
this form of grief centers on topography—  
anger's grief's impassable, an infinite wallow  
—being asked of you? Make lead the new high.

14

Read the headlines for measure—remember  
the streams poured; the premature exits.

#

Before you sign your name on chalk  
outlines, know this: the shape you  
mold your hand to hold a gun is  
the same as to sway a pen, to cup a yawn  
or knot the lace of a doo rag—it's hard  
to ward grief off—to know when—  
harsh decisions commission loss—knotty  
if you're not taught bona fide truths about  
the world—how it owes you not one thing

—read this letter ad nauseam—corners  
always do what they do best—the test’s  
rigid—what you practice becomes moral.

Before you sign your name on pavement  
know that, this partnership, is permanent.