SL

Essay

The Pit

Eric Stinton

When we got to the chicken fight, a tall gangly man stepped out of the shadows and asked us for $40. We had been told parking would only cost $20, but the man, encrusted in dust and sweat as if he had been outside since morning and had not yet washed the day off, informed us that it was $20 for each of us, even though we were both in one car. I was with Marcus, one of my oldest and closest friends, and though both of us realized we were getting ripped off, we also recognized reality: it was late at night and neither of us had been here before, at a house tucked deep against the Koʻolau Mountains on Oahu, where there were no streetlights, where we didn't know anybody and where people would force roosters to kill each other for entertainment.

I handed the man two twenties. He ushered us into the field-like front yard to park the car before disappearing back into the night.

I had to drive over a tree root to find a spot for my 18-year-old Honda Civic, the only sedan in a sea of lifted trucks, most of which had large stickers slapped across the back windows that read "DEFEND HAWAII" or "UNCIVILIZED." A handful of guys footballing chickens in one arm weaved between the trucks, making their way toward the main house. Others had set up portable lights and grills behind their trucks as if they were tailgating, with the notable difference of caged roosters nearby performing trained maneuvers on command, preparing for the night like prizefighters shadowboxing before entering the ring.

In the darkness I could not tell how big the property was. Its proximity to the mountains reminded me of the house in which I grew up, a few towns over in a neighborhood called Olomana, named after the local mountain which, according to legend, is the corpse of a giant warrior. Although our actual yard wasn't very big, it rolled directly into what my family called The Jungle — technically a rainforest — where there was a stream, wild pigs and, occasionally, runaways from the nearby juvenile correctional facility.

People who knew of Olomana beyond the mountain itself typically thought of either the correctional facility or the alternative school for disciplinary transfers — also called Olomana — where kids who got in too much trouble at regular school were sent, a kind of last chance school before ending up in juvey. It always gave me credibility when I told people I was from Olomana, that I was an "Olo-Monstah," a term that carried a particular pride from being associated with an

intimidating place, even though my neighborhood was mostly retirees who kept to themselves. Being from the Olomana neighborhood did not make me an Olo-Monstah, but I didn't correct people who thought otherwise.

The Jungle behind that house always felt infinite as a kid, and in my imagination, still does. The expansive yard at the chicken fight must have felt the same for the kids lucky enough to play in it, an endless natural playground without supervision or boundaries.

But on that night it was a parking lot in service of gambling and blood sport. Marcus and I walked on thick grass through the rows of parked trucks, the smell of spilled beer growing stronger as we neared a large tent, the canopy illuminated by an orange glow. A squinty haze of smoke from vapes and cigarettes and blunts floated above an all-ages crowd gathered around a craps table reacting audibly to each roll of the dice. Something clicked when I saw the kids intermingling with adults while they smoked, drank, and gambled.

In the 7th grade math class I taught, I had my students working on a project for our probability unit, creating their own games of chance. Almost every kid constructed some kind of makeshift carnival game: tossing duct tape rings around empty soda bottles, or duct tape balls into cups, that sort of thing. But without exception, the most difficult and troublesome kids all made craps tables, including detailed and accurate explanations of the rules. These were the boys — and they were almost always boys — who regularly got into fights, who would abruptly get up and leave in the middle of class just to shout at a friend walking in the hallway, and who, whenever they were frustrated — which was often — would tell teachers to fuck off.

All these behaviors flowed from and compensated for their shortcomings in fundamental academic skills: reading, writing, and math. When seventh graders are operating academically at early elementary school levels, they've already learned that they're bad at school, so they don't like it, so why even try? Helping them close the gaps begins with convincing them to believe that it's worth trying in the first place.

Not surprisingly, all these kids have rough upbringings, most raised by their aunties and uncles or grandparents because their parents are either addicts or in jail; kids who sleep most nights in a tent on the beach or the backseat of a family member's truck. These are also the kids who, for fun, like to catch feral chickens — which are all over the place in Hawaii, at beachside parking lots and city alleyways and everywhere in between. Even people who know about Hawaii's social ills often forget that the addicted, impoverished, and houseless have kids, too.

One of the methods our math department used to convince the kids to try was called "The Learning Pit," which visualized the process of learning: a quick fall into a pit of frustration and confusion, followed by a slow uphill

climb where they can take a break and use their resources — their notes, the internet, asking a friend or a teacher for help — until they successfully emerge from the pit having learned, and knowing how to learn. The hope was that our students would have their feelings acknowledged — that math really is hard — but also learn what steps they could take when they felt frustrated, to develop those "struggle muscles" and persist instead of simply quitting.

Whenever kids started putting their heads down on their desks or carving penises into their chairs or whatever else they felt like doing in the moment to avoid their work, we'd ask them where they were in the pit, to remind them that this was a natural part of the learning process and to figure out what they could do next to help get out. The Learning Pit was meant to be symbolic, but the metaphor materialized as the classroom itself, a place where kids fought against equations and variables and the residual feelings left by their previous math classes, until the bell rang and signaled their only escape, their momentary retreat.

At the chicken fight, Marcus and I made our way through the collective gaze of suspicious eyeballs in the gambling tent to another pit. Wrapped in a chest-high chain-link fence, it was about 20 feet by 20 feet square with a plywood ceiling roughly the height of a basketball rim. Three large spotlights illuminated the bloodstained dirt and feathers on the ground.

It was larger than I thought it would be — I had never been to a chicken fight before and was trying to remember why I was at one now — a proper coliseum relative to the size of the birds.

Marcus and I lined up along the fence just as a fight was about to start. Two black-feathered roosters with bladed spurs circled each other in the pit while their trainers stood against the wall inside, ready to intervene if necessary. Wings flapped in a quick violent flutter, both birds tangled mid-air, briefly indistinguishable, but when they landed, one of them remained motionless on the ground.

"That was fast!" said a small girl in an excited, high-pitched voice. She was sitting in a folding chair a few feet away from the pit, eating chili and rice from a paper plate on her lap. She couldn't have been any older than 3rd or 4th grade.

In the pit the trainers grabbed their animals, the winner tucking his bird into his forearm, the loser pulling his lifeless bird up off the ground by its feet. A man rounded the pit area wearing board shorts and a long-sleeved neon yellow t-shirt — the kind of shirt that construction workers in Hawaii are required to wear on job sites. He pulled a thick wad of cash from the fanny pack around his waist and began handing out bills to the winning bettors.

Next to the pit sat a table with a rusty balance scale that looked like it had been forgotten in a garage for several years. The next pair of chickens to fight, one with white-feathers and the other with black, were being weighed to ensure they were comparably sized.

“When’s the last day of school?” a man asked the little girl eating chili and rice. “You counting down the days?”

“No, I have to go summer school,” she said.

“Good you go summer school,” the man said. “Summer school is good.” She finished her food and got up to throw away her plate. We had been there for less than an hour, but I was already thinking about when we’d leave.

The two trainers entered the pit carrying their birds, though not in the one-armed football style I had seen earlier. Instead they held the chickens away from their bodies with both hands, priming them for combat by almost allowing them to peck each other’s faces. From the moment they hatch, chickens have natural hierarchical instincts encoded in their DNA — it’s where the term “pecking order” comes from. These instincts provide safety and structure for the easily preyed-upon chicks, compelling them to follow close behind the mother hen at all times. Cockfights hijack these instincts. When two roosters meet to assert dominance in a normal setting, the confrontation is naturally violent but not always fatal, since retreat is possible. Not so in the pit, where blades are attached to the spurs on their feet, and there is no possible escape. In the pit, a bird is going to die.

Spectators lined the edges of the pit, pointing at the birds, holding up fingers and yelling bets at the bookie. “Take 7! Take 7! Take 7!” “Even! Even! Even!” One of the few women in the crowd pointed to another man and clarified: “He said even.” Another man in the crowd responded: “Good for him!” Laughter erupted. A man turned to me and asked if I wanted to bet. I had used all the cash I brought on parking, but Marcus accepted the offer. “How much?” the man asked. “Four,” said Marcus.

It was already obvious that we weren’t regulars, but this exchange made it even more obvious we didn’t belong. Marcus assumed “four” meant four dollars ($4) while the man meant four twenties ($80). When Marcus pulled out his singles, the man looked at him, waved his hand dismissively, and then turned around to find someone else. Now even more eyes fell on us.

Ordinarily Marcus would have blended in — we’re both from Hawaii, but since he’s Japanese-Filipino, he looks local. That’s part of why I asked him to come with me, aside from having a new and strange experience with one of my best friends. But for some reason this night he wore a pair of overalls and a bucket hat, which contrasted sharply with the blood-spattered shirts, gold chains, and face tattoos that almost everyone else sported.

I was the only white dude there, which I expected. That’s not unusual in Hawaii, the least white and least American of the 50 states, and it’s neither unfamiliar nor uncomfortable for me. I feel more at ease culturally and interpersonally with local people of any background than I do with white people from the continent.

A lot of the national discourse on race doesn't apply in Hawaii, including many of the ideas associated with whiteness. While being white in Hawaii carries the same kinds of privileges it does on the continent, whiteness has never been seen as the norm to which other racial and cultural identities are compared, not even among white people (at least the ones from Hawaii). Here, being white is very much a distinct identity — there's even a word for it, haole, which originally meant any kind of foreigner but has evolved to just mean a white person. On the continent being white connotes a sense of belonging, "real" Americanness, whereas being brown or Asian often elicits questions like "where are you really from?" In Hawaii it's inverted; if you're brown you're assumed to be from Hawaii — local — whereas if you're white you get asked where you're originally from.

We turned our attention back to the pit, where the fight was about to start. The birds first raised their wings as if in slow motion, then abruptly lunged in the air, fluttering their wings and kicking. Both landed on their feet amidst a cloud of dirt and feathers. The crowd oooh'd and aaah'd. I found myself just as absorbed.

It was a strange sensation for me, familiar yet foreign. I've been a lifelong fan of combat sports — boxing and mixed martial arts, specifically — and have covered them professionally for nearly a decade. I know the beauty and brutality of the fight game, the complicated ethics and undeniable allure of violent spectacle. When MMA started to become popular in America in the mid-90s, Senator John McCain notoriously called it "human cockfighting," partly due to the almost nonexistent regulations at the time, but also because of his personal entanglement with boxing promoters who didn't want any competition.

Combat sports probably would not exist in a moral society, but ultimately the fighters are consenting adults who are compensated for work that people are broadly willing to pay for, even if only a small portion of professional fighters are appropriately rewarded for the various traumas they experience. Tut-tutting doesn't change that reality; if anything it comes across as classist. There are plenty of examples of pugilists born into dire circumstances who have fought their way out of poverty, improving their lives and the lives of those around them in the process, even if only for a short time. The last thing they need is someone from financial stability clutching their pearls over the way they earn a living.

I'm not sure any of those justifications apply to the chickens, though. They certainly don't consent to fight. Trainers argue that they take good care of their birds to be as good at fighting as they can be, which involves a level of care greater than the average chicken receives, but this is only true up until the moment they force their chickens to fight to the death for the chance at financial gain.

Then again, by fighting in the pit are they really treated any worse than the birds that are bought and sold to end up in deep fryers? Do they consent to become gladiators any less than others consent to become

McNuggets? Are those who believe the state of Hawaii should crack down on cockfighting really interested in animal welfare? Do they realize they've discovered yet another way to punish disenfranchised people of color? Or are they just unaware that either way that's the end result?

The action continued in the pit, this fight lasting much longer than the previous one, with both chickens repeatedly engaging in the same fluttering jump attacks but failing to land a finishing death blow. They leapt at each other, slashing, feathers floating in the air, then circled before rearing up to do the same thing again. Eventually the fight ended in a mid-air collision of wings, feet, and blades. When the birds landed, the white-feathered chicken had blood on its plumage, and for a moment it wasn't clear from which bird the blood originated. But the other chicken remained on the ground, eyes still alert, blood leaking from its twitching body. His trainer scooped up the rooster and killed it with a swift, snapping pull of its neck.

Later, I asked my friend what happens to the dead chickens. Not long ago, the winner got to keep the losing chicken for a meal, but nowadays the birds are so pumped full of steroids that they're unsafe to eat. "They just get thrown away," my friend told me.

The trainers shook hands, and most of the crowd disbanded, going back to their trucks or the craps table, those remaining waiting for the bookie to make his rounds.

Two boys in Pop Warner football jerseys started racing around the pit, weaving between adults in the crowd and trying to tackle each other. A muscular man with a thick gold chain and Polynesian tattoos on his face and neck stepped in and put his hand out to stop them. "Eh boy, watch where you fuckin' going!" The boys slowed to a walk, but once they were a few feet away, they resumed chasing each other at full speed.

A few weeks earlier, a man had been shot and killed at a chicken fight elsewhere on the island, a rare act of gun violence for Hawaii, and one that momentarily put the pastime in the local news spotlight. Cockfighting is common in the islands, but it's still illegal; Hawaii is one of only eight states where it's a misdemeanor and not a felony act of animal cruelty. Although misdemeanors carry a maximum punishment of one year in prison and a $2,000 fine, arrests for cockfighting are rare, the fines typically only a fraction of the maximum amount.

After the shooting, state legislators were surveyed to see if they believed cockfighting should be changed to a felony offense. Twelve said yes, seven said no, and nine were unsure. The "yeses" cited animal cruelty and the attraction of a "criminal element" at cockfights, primarily gambling and drug use (check and check). Most of the "no" votes argued that raising the criminal penalties would further stress an already overburdened prison

system that dispropotionately affects people of color, while a few called for outright legalization. The "unsures" mostly shrugged their shoulders, in either ignorance ("I have no opinion, I've never been to one," said one representative) or cynicism ("If [police departments] aren't going to enforce it, then what's the difference [between a misdemeanor and a felony]?" said another). The other 48 lawmakers — 63% of the legislature for those counting at home — did not respond, perhaps out of caution, perhaps apathy.

The man who scolded the boys laid down on his side next to the pit, and a woman brought him a plate of chili and rice. Meanwhile, there was a commotion over by the scale: one of the chickens, a brown feathered hulk, was so big they were having trouble finding a suitable opponent. One bird after another was weighed, only for its trainer to decline the fight after calculating the weight difference.

Then one enterprising trainer offered his chicken up despite the weight difference, on the condition of receiving more favorable betting odds. He looked confident, like he knew something no one else did. His bird looked immaculate, with white feathers that appeared freshly brushed, but it was distinctly smaller than the brown bird. I know very little about chickens, but it was clear this was a beautiful specimen. The two trainers agreed on the conditions, shook hands, and the crowd started to trickle back to the pit. Marcus and I stood along the fence line, our curiosity piqued by the dynamic of the size difference and the demeanor of the white bird's trainer, who seemed unbothered by his bird's disadvantage.

Despite what martial arts movies and enthusiasts might say, size is probably the most significant factor in a fight — it's why combat sports have weight classes. Of course a smaller, highly skilled fighter can beat a larger, less skilled opponent, but only to a point. Eventually skill differential will be trumped by size difference. A larger fighter with skills roughly comparable to those of a smaller one has a huge advantage.

The trainers in the pit were giving their birds introductory pecks when I heard a voice directed at me: "You in the silver truck?" It was the guy who scolded the kids just a few minutes earlier. I told him I wasn't.

"The black truck?" he asked.

"No, blue Civic."

"Oh ok. Where you from?" I told him I was from Kailua — I didn't specify Olomana, since he seemed like the kind of guy who might take it as a challenge and also the kind of guy you don't want to challenge — and Marcus from Kaneohe. He nodded, and without breaking eye contact asked, "How'd you find out about us?" He kept looking straight at me, paying attention to my movements as much as my words.

One reason I've always done well with the rough boys in my classes is that I can talk fights with them, and in the last few years, my boys have been just as interested in chicken fighting as they are in human combat.

I had expected this would happen at some point in the night. After the shooting and subsequent media scrutiny, I figured the cockfighting community would be on alert. Leading up to the fight, I even stressed out over what to wear, worried that I'd look like a narc. My friend who told me about the fight — and usually participates in them but was busy this time — gave me a shirt to wear, a black one with a picture of a chicken standing triumphantly in front of the steep cliffside of the Koʻolau mountains. The front had the name of his chicken farm, the back said, "Be Humble, No Grumble." I pointed to the shirt and said I was _____'s friend from jiu-jitsu.

"He kept inviting me, but I was always busy," I lied. I wasn't invited; I invited myself.

The man looked at my shirt, registered my friend's name, then reached out to shake my hand. "No worries, you good, just never seen you before."

In the pit, the trainers held their chickens, the large brown one and the small white one, waiting for the bookie to make his rounds. As more spectators trickled in, a familiar face pushed his way to the front of the crowd on the opposite side of the pit. It was one of my former students. Ty Boy — or as he calls himself, "Ty Boy Da Legend." He had grown a little since I last saw him, but he was still short and wiry, still moved with the same twitchy, agitated energy. He was with a couple of older guys, his dad and uncles probably, though I can't say for sure because when he was my student I only ever interacted with his mother.

Ty Boy was unforgettable for all the wrong reasons. I taught him during the lockdown year, but he was deemed such a high-needs student that when almost every other student was at home on their computers, he was required to be physically on campus, one of only about a dozen kids who attended our school in-person that year.

And to make sure he stayed on task and didn't get into trouble, he was assigned an adult "one-to-one," a registered behavior technician (RBT), who was with him at all times of the school day. As far as special ed accommodations go, that's about as restrictive as it gets for kids who don't have severe learning disabilities or physical challenges. But Ty Boy chewed through a new RBT every few weeks, unleashing verbal attacks and threats of violence with the kind of undiluted meanness only a 13-year-old can muster. His intensity reminded me of something I learned about centipedes while growing up: the adolescent ones have the most painful stings because they don't know how to control their venom.

On more than one occasion Ty Boy would stand up in the middle of class and yell "DEEZ NUTS!" even if only adults were around — and yes, it was hard not to laugh sometimes. He cussed out students and teachers alike with equal aggression, and challenged his peers to fight as often and as quickly as he did his elders.

One time he became so frustrated in my math class that he abruptly got up and stormed out. His RBT at the time was an older woman, and I didn't feel confident that she would be able to catch up with him, or that she would be able to convince him to come back to class if she did. I asked her to take charge of of the online students, and I briskly followed Ty Boy outside. When I caught up to him in the hallway and called his name, he turned around and squared up like he was about to throw a punch. I paused and looked at him, and then held up my hands as if they were focus pads and called out "jab-jab-cross."

He threw the combo accordingly into my palms. We did a few more combos, and I got him to return to class by promising to show him some highlight videos of my favorite boxers: Roberto Duran, Emanuel Augustus, and Roy Jones Jr. I'm not sure if he would've thrown a punch at me had I not called out the combo, but from then on he was more or less manageable when he was with me, even as he continued to be a nightmare to other teachers.

One reason I've always done well with the rough boys in my classes is that I can talk fights with them, and in the last few years, my boys have been just as interested in chicken fighting as they are in human combat. I think that's why I made the effort to attend the cockfight, hoping that if I understood the culture of chicken fighting as well as my kids do, it might help me better understand them.

Ty Boy made it through 7th grade, but within the first two weeks of 8th grade — when all students physically attended school again — he quickly received a disciplinary transfer for fighting too much. He was then sent to "the bad kid school," Olomana, the school for kids who, for one reason or another, can't function in a traditional school setting. From there a lot of kids wind up in the juvenile correctional facility where, when they manage to sneak out, they end up in The

Jungle behind the house I grew up in. A friend teaches over there and keeps me updated on all my former students who get sent to him. Ty Boy was now in 9th grade, and, my friend assured me, still as feral as ever.

Ty Boy either didn't notice me or didn't remember me. He was fixated on the chickens in front of him. I focused my attention between watching the fights and watching him.

In the pit, the chickens — the large brown one and undersized white one — didn't leap into action like the birds in the previous fights. The larger chicken looked aloof, like it didn't sense a threat to its hierarchical supremacy. The small chicken kept its reptilian gaze upon the big one, but remained still, perhaps assuming the other bird was the rightful alpha, perhaps waiting for a display of aggressive behavior before reacting. Ty Boy held a wad of money in his hands and was screaming at the birds, "Get that fucka!" I couldn't tell which chicken he wanted to win, or if he didn't care either way and just wanted to see some blood.

Impatient, the trainers picked up the birds and reset them in close proximity to each other in the middle of the pit. Now the large chicken reared up with outstretched wings, prompting the smaller one to leap toward it. The larger bird rebuffed the attack with a fluttering of its wings. The fight was on, and Ty Boy, shaking with familiar ADHD excitement, was more attentive than I ever saw him at school.

The large bird attacked next, jumping into the air and kicking wildly. The small one ducked underneath and sprung around immediately to counter, a move clearly drilled into instinct. Now the small chicken gambit made sense: size is an advantage, but if all it takes is a single clean strike to win, a quick, maneuverable bird has a real chance. The chickens faced each other, opening their wings and bowing before bursting into attack.

There was something familiar about their movements. They made me think of my dogs doing a play bow and then jumping up in excitement. Would I watch a dog fight? I thought. The idea repulsed me. I know I wouldn't. Would Ty Boy? I wondered if he had seen one already.

The small chicken dodged and maneuvered in impressive fashion, but it couldn't mount an effective attack. It merely stayed alive by ducking repeatedly. The larger bird then either got wise to the ducking motion or got lucky. Either way it landed on top of the smaller bird, flailed its bladed spurs and sliced its smaller opponent open. I looked up to see Ty Boy yell "FUCK!" The men he was with pushed their way through the crowd, and Ty Boy followed quickly behind them.

I want to say he bet on the smaller bird not because of the odds and the chance to win more money, but because he identified with the underdog, understood what it's like to be undersized, to have the odds against you but feel like you have to fight anyway. That maybe he saw something of himself in the smaller bird and felt compassion for it. I want to say what else he did in that moment, what hidden emotions may have been whispered in betrayal by his facial expressions. That maybe he felt, for a moment, uncomfortable, or scared. Like maybe there was a part of him that was still afraid of violence, or at least shocked by it. Like maybe there was a part of him that was still a boy, because that's what he was.

But I don't know. I, too, found myself engrossed in the action, pulling for the smaller bird. I was upset at the outcome in a way Ty Boy was not but fixated on the violence just the same. He was standing in front of me, and then he wasn't. In between there was a chicken fight that we both watched. We shared that experience, a connection carved into me as if by a bladed spur, one that he isn't even aware of and probably never will be. Though, I guess that's no different than a lot of students who leave a mark on you, who remain in front of you for a short time that feels like forever in the moment before they disappear into the darkness, rarely to be seen again.

When Marcus and I made our way back to my car, I saw Ty Boy at the craps table. I thought about going up to him but decided not to. I already felt guilty just being there, and I felt that guilt more acutely when I saw Ty Boy. Even though he didn't notice me, my presence felt like an endorsement of it all, a betrayal of whatever teacherly influence I may have had on him.

Cockfighting has been in Hawaii since at least the early 1900s, a popular pastime among plantation laborers. I understand the culture and the history and the thrill of violence but being there still made me uncomfortable. Beyond the questionable ethics of forcing animals to fight for our entertainment, the presence of gambling and drugs and small children all in the same place felt wrong. How could all that not negatively impact the kids? From what I knew, Ty Boy grew up going to cockfights, learned to take pleasure in violence, and became a menace at school. I don't think those are unrelated.

It's not a coincidence that most if not all of my special ed students in any given year are either Hawaiian — a term reserved for the indigenous people of Hawaii, not simply for those who live in or are from Hawaii — or non-white locals, just as it's no coincidence that SPED classrooms on the continent are typically composed of Black and brown kids. The downstream effects of historical wrongs — which often take the form of poverty and trauma — may not be considered learning disabilities outright, but it's a good way to think about them, because that's a significant way in which they manifest in real people. It's hard to want to learn algebra when your mom is in jail, and you sleep in your dad's truck most nights. It's hard to want to do homework when you can watch cockfighting instead. Violence, drugs, and gambling are much more exciting than worksheets, tests, and projects.

But when I saw Ty Boy at the chicken fight, hours away from where he lives at midnight on a school night, screaming with bloodlust, it confirmed a feeling that as a teacher I've long intuited but couldn't quite articulate before: I'm not actually saving anyone. Most of us teachers have very little long-term impact on most of our students. In a given year I teach about 130 kids, most of whom simply move on with their lives when they leave my classroom. There are of course exceptions, kids who keep in touch year after year, but they're just that: exceptions. And in special education, those exceptions are even rarer. All you can do is try to teach them something valuable to take with them — how to solve problems without violence, how to identify and communicate feelings without embarrassment, how to be proud of themselves and where they're from without thinking other people are inferior — and hope that it tilts them toward a slightly better trajectory so that next year's teachers can do the same thing.

But a lot of my kids don't end the year on a better path. They aren't any closer to a happy ending. The odds are stacked against them, and usually the odds win. The larger bird almost always comes out on top, and the losers get thrown out and forgotten.

Marcus and I decided to leave, but the fights continued. The front yard was still full of lifted trucks when we left. By the time I dropped off Marcus and headed home, it was well past midnight, and I had work in a few hours.

Before I fell asleep, I thought about my students who made the craps tables in math class, who have probably been to some chicken fights, too. I wondered if I had let them down this year, if I should tell them that I went to a cockfight. I wondered if the ills of the practice would be offset, even a little, if this experience helped me build better relationships with them, in the same way I sometimes connect with them through talking about fighting.

I hoped so. Against all odds you still pull for the smaller bird and try to help it escape its fate for as long as you can, even if it's just for a little while.

Sometimes, all you have as a teacher is hope. And that has to be enough.

Eric Stinton is a writer and teacher from Kailua, Hawai'i. He writes a regular column about Hawai'i for *Honolulu Civil Beat*, and from 2015-2021 he wrote a weekly combat sports column for *Sherdog*. His work has appeared in *Bamboo Ridge*, *The Classical*, *Dwell Magazine*, *FLUX Hawai'i*, *Hana Hou! Magazine*, *Harvard Review*, and *Vice Sports*, among others. His writing has been recognized by *Longreads* as the Best Sports Writing of the year, and as a notable selection in *Best American Sports Writing*. He has won various awards from the Society of Professional Journalists and the Society for Features Journalism.