

aTtention

By Chad Lutz

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor ERICKA RUSSELL writes: Chad Lutz's "Attention" holds our attention in its magnetic movement of a marathon, an unwanted medal, and a plagued runner. The sharp "BANG" of the starting gun jolts this runner into no ordinary race. The "strike" of each step holds desperation. The runner's past haunts his every step, the present taunts him with what could have been, and both reunite and meet him at the finish line. Rather than telling us pain, loss, reality cannot be outrun, Lutz displays one man's struggle to try just that.*

All the while, Lutz commands language with no flashy poetics, no figurative confusion, no written gymnastics. His meticulous diction is natural and precise, packed with purpose, and commands us to read word-by-word. Just reading these sixteen words out of the sixty-four in his second paragraph—ceremonial, gun, marks, pistol, heralded, still, BANG, pistons, hearts, thunder, calcium, cages, ignites, heads, bouncing, rhythms—Lutz not only supplies a packed voice, he reveals much more than any explicit sentence or passage.

Now, we see the difference between trying to get attention and trying to create attention. We are invested in this runner, in his medal-winning attempt to conjure attention, and in his misguided coping. Lutz writes in a language and way that is understood, raw, felt, relatable. This experienced runner doesn't want the trophy, the congratulations, that kind of attention. We don't need to be marathon runners—and I am certainly no runner—to see ourselves in this pull and tug of past and present, reality and fiction, before and after. Lutz's short story is no short story, for it is as cyclical and perpetual as loss, as grief.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

I think about all the problems in the world and how insignificant all my troubles truly are, but every time I do a voice deep down tells me I need approval from the people who brought me into this world and it tears my soul in two.

(Spacing and format is author's own.)

Attention

By Chad Lutz

Sure, this is just another race, but I'm not thinking about that as I get into position. I'm not thinking about the clock or the other runners or how hungry I am. I'm thinking about my parents on the sidelines. The two most agitated-looking people here. Two people watching everything but me. Two people who can't keep their eyes on the road.

The Mayor steps up to the race field holding a ceremonial gun and hollers for everyone to take their marks. He raises the pistol like a heralded thing, and for a moment everything is still. Nothing moves but the wind. And then, BANG! Legs become pistons. Hearts pound thunder behind calcium cages. The world ignites, as 1,400 heads begin bouncing to their individual rhythms.

I race out front of the herd to establish pace and comfortably settle into third. I'm about twenty yards behind first place; still plenty of time to take the lead.

Still plenty of time for my parents to notice, too.

The crowd thins by the end of the first mile, and so does the field. It's just me, the other front runners (a small group of twig-thin participants), and the open road, which has become craterous as town becomes country. The field runs past a pasture at the county line and a chorus of friendly moos is there to greet us.

I close my eyes. Open them. The air is hot and thick, but I'm feeling deft and daring. With a small, swift acceleration, forehead barely showing any signs of sweat, I slide past one of the only two human twigs ahead of me and settle in.

One down.

One to go.

I glance over my shoulder at the woman I've just passed. Already five paces ahead, I can still hear her lungs chug as she loses ground.

"Good luck," she calls out with a smile. And then, just like that, the field is mine to lose.

The course loops back on itself. The start is the unofficial halfway mark. I can see my parents on the sidelines as I crest the final hill. They're on their phones.

"Mom! Dad!" I shout. My heart is an active wave of hope as I wave, but neither of them looks up. I shout again, but it's clear they're not paying attention. They both have their headphones in, laughing at their screens.

"Mom!" I shout. "Dad!"

My mom nudges my dad gently and shoves her phone in his face. I watch my dad erupt in laughter so disgusting it makes me hate him even more than I already do.

First place huffs and puffs in labored locomotion a few yards ahead, but now all I can see is red. The sky, the ground, the people in the world.

Red.

The front runner is basically choking on their own breath as I pull even, snot stains their upper lip and cheeks, but I still don't see it.

The runner stays silent, head forward. He wears sunglasses that wrap around his face and conceal his eyes.

A race field of 11,000 people on your tail is one thing, but conversation in the lead pack says one of two things, it says I'm here to enjoy myself at any expense (wasted energy) and it says you aren't winded. The winded don't speak.

I shout something guttural and annoying like, "Woooooooooooo!" and pull away from the lead. The lead does and says nothing as he falls back, reduced to breathing and nothing more.

My feet strike the ground so hard they could spark. People along the side of the road aren't so much cheering as they are in awe. Somewhere up ahead, a man runs out into the street for a high-five. I slap his hand so hard he winces and then carry on like nothing happened. A few minutes later, I pass a couple of kids cowering against their mother. I whoop and holler again and one of them cries. The mom shoots me a murderous look and pulls her loved ones even closer.

On I run.

The last mile of the race is a long, sprawling hill. My chest is tight and my arms burn, but my strides are quick and my breathing is balanced. But, none of this matters if the right people aren't around to see it.

I think about my mom.

I think about my dad.

I think about all the problems in the world and how insignificant all my troubles truly are, but every time I do a voice deep down tells me I need approval from the people who brought me into this world and it tears my soul in two.

The last mile passes in a blur. Tears stream down my face as I stampede toward the finish. A race official not paying any attention wanders onto the race course and nearly collides

with me. I spin at the last second and only end up grazing the man, but he still has something to say.

“Fuck you,” is what I tell him.

“Sorry,” is what he said.

Up ahead, thirty yards, is where my parents are waiting with cameras ready and proud smiles on their faces. A place right next to the finish so they can get the best shots. So what if they didn't take a single photo at the start. Everybody knows the best photos are the finish.

But my parents aren't there.

I flash through the finish and break the tape a full two minutes under record time.

“What a run!” the race officials cry, as they gather around me. One of them approaches me and reaches out to pat me on the back, but I swat their hand away.

“Don't touch me,” I huff, and storm away as fast as I can.

“Don't you want your medal?” the race official calls back.

I pretend I don't hear them and stomp off toward my car.

The only light in my bedroom is the small fluorescent lamp sitting on my desk. Under the lamp is a box of memorabilia I'm leafing through. The box is filled with pictures and medals and trophies; artifacts from another life, a life now lived only in memories.

The phone rings and when I answer, I'm not surprised to hear my sister.

She says, “How'd the race go this morning?”

I tell her, “Fine,” and grunt uncomfortably.

“What's fine?” she asks. “Did you win?”

“Yeah,” I say, evenly.

“And?”

“And nothing. I raced. That’s all. No big thing.”

“It’s the first time you’ve run a race since,” she says, “this was supposed to be a big thing for all of us.”

“Well, it’s nothing and it never mattered,” I say so sharp I can feel its barbs myself.

My sister says nothing for a while. She clears her throat, and I ask if she said anything, but she says, “No,” she didn’t and we end right back at square one.

“I miss them, too,” she says eventually.

“I never said I did,” I tell her.

“That’s just it,” she says before she hangs up. “You don’t have to.”

“No,” I said, “I don’t.”

After the call, it’s like what?

I stare into a whirl of memories that make two years feel like it was just this afternoon.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The life of a professional distance runner can be very lonely. It often gives you time to think. When something heavy weighs on you, something that commands your attention, that's where this story came from. A place of loss and isolation. I think of it as chained freedom, but there really isn't a word to describe it. I think only narrative can do these ideas justice.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Chad W. Lutz is a speedy, non-binary writer born in Akron, Ohio, in 1986 and raised in the neighboring suburb of Stow. They graduated from Kent State University with their BA in English in 2008 and from Mills College in Oakland, California, with their MFA in Creative Writing in 2018. Their first book, *For the Time Being*, is currently available through J. New Books.

EDITOR’S BIO: Ericka Russell, 25, lives in Bowling Green, KY, where she is a graduate assistant in the MFA Program at Western Kentucky University. She is awaiting publication in *Bridge Eight* and *Asylum*.

