



Source: Daniel Williams, 'Masked man fronts terrorists' news spot', *Washington Post* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 28/09/05.

Tags: [death](#), [sport](#)

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He had never lost a fight. In all the years of back alley brawls, silent duels, quick and dirty wet jobs, wait outs before a kill so long that his opponent forgot the game was on, and kills so fast that his opponent's awareness lost the sprint finish with death by a nose, he had never even come close.

Things were different now. He had no weapons—what was strapped to his leg, tucked into the back of his pants, holstered under his shoulder and on his hip, all of it was useless here. The field of play was completely foreign to him. He had never seen a landscape like this before, never felt weather like this. He had walked on concrete, sand, even quicksand, crawled through marshes and jungles, wriggled up dirty sheets to get what he had paid for. But this wasn't even like swimming. It was possible he was falling through air. But if that were true, everything else was falling with him. Everything else was perfectly still, too.

His experience was that of a big fish in a small pond. Now here he was, and he knew his adversary had been in the biggest pond imaginable. But she was no fish at all, nor fowl for that matter. He did not know what she was—he had even assigned her gender almost randomly. Something animal in him understood she was not animal.

The front of his head was throbbing with nervousness and a splitting headache. The back of his mind was like so many filing cabinets flung open, and the papers, on which were written his every memory, were fluttering through the air, coasting, slipping left, then right, catching currents of air, bumping each other softly. One drifted past his right wrist, giving him a paper cut. He didn't recognize the color of his own blood. He wondered what memory could be so casually hurtful, but then remembered it was just the nature of paper.

He searched the falling papers for a clue. One floated by, and he thought he saw his name, but now he wasn't even sure what it was. The letters danced and rearranged themselves, changed size and font. Maybe it was his father's name. Another sheet held the record of a warm, sunny day clearing brush on the family farm. But his family, who years ago were told he had died in a helicopter crash in the mountainous region of a country they couldn't spell, hadn't had a farm. Were these not his papers? Had someone else's filing cabinet sprung open? Were these the memories of the adversary? It was hard to imagine her leading such a pedestrian life. 'Life' didn't even seem to belong in that sentence. And for all he knew, the very idea of memory was alien to her. What if she simply was the present tense? If so, what did that make him?

The adversary spoke inside his head. Or musicated. It wasn't any language he'd ever heard, but the tone made sense enough, and it wasn't friendly. And if it were, he had no way of knowing that. What friend assumed that stance? Maybe the cultural body language was different,

but that seemed foolish to gamble on. Did she have a culture? What was she anyway?

Neither of them had executed a single move yet, but it was already clear that the rules didn't work here—even the ways to break the rules didn't apply. Cheating was out of the question because nothing was out of bounds. Had this been some sporting competition, there would have been no referee, no goal lines, no nets, no scoreboard. In the end it was going to be shirts all, skins nil. Or the other way round. A ref would have been useful to blow a whistle and get things started. He had no idea how long they had been standing motionless, face to face.

Inside his head, a whistle pierced. It was on.

He had vastly overestimated her power. When she struck him it was glancing, feeling more like felt than iron. Out of disbelief, maybe even stupidity, he left himself open so she would do it again. The result was the same. And the same again. She was all hat and no cattle. Giddy, he opened his arms wide and let her empty what now seemed a very small arsenal. It was like sparring with feathers.

She backed off and retreated a few paces. Was she out of breath? She didn't seem to breathe at all. His own lungs filled, and he suppressed a victory cry. The weight of fear lifted from his shoulders, a great anvil of a bird taking flight. He drew a long custom-made blade that looked like a very restrained scimitar and advanced on her, arms raised. She was fixed where she was, looking straight at him.

He decided the first blow should not be fatal. If he could know nothing else about his adversary, he could at least know her pain. Maybe he could even make her plead for her life before he ended it.

He sliced at her middle. She didn't wince, but kept staring at him. He felt the sting of the cut in his own gut, and looked down to see a thin red line spreading laterally across his belly. He hacked again, this time at her legs. After a few strokes, he fell to the ground, his thighs slippery with blood. Prostrate, he stabbed her in the liver, only to find his own was on fire. The adversary did not move.

Days passed.

He had to end it. Hoisting himself up on his blade, he advanced with difficulty towards her. Leaning against her motionless form, he pulled her head straight up by the hair, and decapitated her.

The cabinets sprung open again, the papers flew everywhere. As his eyes dimmed, one paper passed him, a picture of his adversary holding his head, which was pointed at the camera, knowing her pain.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Alex Keller.*