

*Mx Hustle*

By Ren Ellis Neyra, for Catalina Schliebener's *Curveball* at M E N  
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I.

The smell of blades bursts through winter's shellac on spring's suppling ground.

Play pepper before the game cause she's got a whip on her. Find your groove in your stance. Find her release's timing on deck. Her heat on the ball is mustard. Eat it up. Connection puts wood on skin. Metal burns threads. Spray the infield, paint the outfield, let loose. Shin-flesh ripped open in the stolen slide sprouts strawberries. Blood gushes from raising pores. Blueing bruise and orange dirt.

The glove is not a mere receptacle but a cut, an organ, an instrument. In a folded drumhead, the ball goes pop. Shoink. Fist in and out of the pocket, throwing-hand memorizing how to grab and lightning lash-out what you field. Line drive leapt for and snagged, a softball caught at the tip-top of a glove is a snow cone. Lick.

Spit in your hand.

Catchers and pitchers deal in signs and variations on where to land what we all know is coming. The slinger slings to a receiver who can frame the pitch, square a circle into a strike, and, if he's got to, pull it quick and release the juice. Out. Playing ball is switchy, and metaphors are material.

A pitch that veers just when the batter thinks she knows how to connect is a curve. Curveballs invite misreadings. Misgenderings. Mix-ups that are not mestizajes.

Getting to first base is the first step in running them all, taking home. The runner on third lurks close to port, ready to thief the booty. Catchers, dirty dykes, live that pirate's life. They've got their eye in two places at once. Shortstop is boss. She'll worker you, call you all off. Even if you're closer to where the pop-up is barreling back down to earth, if she says Mine!, you submit.

3 3's is 9 and 9 gloves in a huddle, break. The nomenclature of this uniformed competition orbits around taking and defending home. Which is not a base but a plate. A pot to piss in. A diamond. Shine bright soiled.

You've got to body-up for it. Finger its contours. Laces tied, hand bodice. Cat paw. Out of the finger holes may burst curving, pink, studded nails. Out may burst ritually bitten down nubs. Oiled leather. Rehearsed and aspirational genders. There is the ball and its shadow. A soaring dig, the glove's opened bend hacks the sky of a homer, and re-traces on the descent the shape of the world.

2.

5 pink mits perreando. Perreo, perreas, perreamos. Humping, humping, humping, humping. The gloves' grind turns on Dancehall. Reggaetón. They wind up. Pussy grabs back.

Banging indoors all fall and winter, the sweet deodorized-anyways-funk of basketball season opened out to grass-stains, sweat that smells of outside, fielding hits, rehearsing defense scenarios. In late January, at the turn of the century, I hoed the dirt and seeded the grass of White Station High School's Lady Spartans softball field. My home felt like that frozen dirt. It had to be broken, cracked to be smoothed, lest a ground ball become a sudden projectile. A hit bouncing unpredictably off clods would elude capture. I was landscaping my odds.

One of my softball nicknames was Rocket Rachel: I was fast, all the bases were my bitches to steal. My basketball nickname was Lil Ray Ray. In Memphis in the 90s, the colorline was in the paint and sod of these sports. When I played YMCA baseball with my brother, I was Andrew's sister. When I played up in fast pitch, summer league softball, I was Melissa's. When my Dad coached one of our softball teams, he called us the Patriots. When my Mom coached one of our baseball teams, we called ourselves the Tigers.

I am one of those people who accumulate names – terms of endearment, diminutives, and reorientations. This must say something about what I value, for this is what accrues to me. A composite, I am also someone who, when very young, would win The Hustle Award. Sometimes, Miss Hustle. I always wanted to be in on the play.

Leadoff. Clutch hitter. Bursts of speed. Down the line. Ponytails. Cleats against the rubber. Eraser, pencil, and box score. Stats as summary. Team as pack. Road trips and dugouts. Salty sweet, sunflower shells and Double Bubble wrappers. I wouldn't have worn a pink glove then but I would now. My genders may have become one.

I caught for my sister until she left home to pitch in college. Then I became shortstop. They said I had a gun on me. I never did. I just wasn't afraid to get hit in the face and shoot arrows that take your ass out. Cupid. Hermes. Light, winged feet. A little Zeus in the wrists.

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