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Cut Time

Four-Handed Études for Boxers

CARLO ROTELLA

Russell, a pleasant young man who split his time between the college on the hill (where I taught) and the boxing gym down below, came up at the end of class one day to tell me that a card of fights would be held in a couple of weeks in nearby Allentown, Pennsylvania. He knew I was interested in boxing and thought I might like to go; also, he needed a ride.

I had figured he was not stopping by to continue our discussion of “Bartleby the Scrivener.” Seated front and center, in a posture of polite interest but not taking many notes, Russell followed the action in class without committing to it. Some students, infighters, sit up front to get your attention, but others do it for the opposite reason: one way to avoid getting hit is to get in too close, nestled cozily against your opponent’s clavicle, where he cannot apply the leverage to hurt you (unless he fouls by head-butting, ear-biting, or calling on people who do not raise their hands). Russell did the reading and wrote his papers, but he was not swept up by fictions and make-believe characters. The class met in the afternoon just before he headed down the hill to the Larry Holmes Training Center, and I suspected that he daydreamed about the imminent shock of punching rather than concentrating on the literary matters at hand.

Every once in a while, though, Russell would say something that reminded me that he was paying attention. Impressed by Frederick Douglass’s late-round TKO of the overseer Covey, he spoke up to remind us that this scene dramatized the red-blooded ideal of self-making with one’s

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own two hands. But he had also been moved to speak by Melville's *Bartleby*, who comprehensively rejects one of the fight world's foundational principles: protect yourself at all times. Russell, breaking form, had his hand up first and initiated the discussion of *Bartleby* with references to Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and the difficult principle of moral inaction. Russell encouraged us to consider whether the pacific *Bartleby*, by preferring to do nothing, was acting decisively against the grain of his situation, or was simply not much good with his hands and therefore destined to be acted upon by a world that kept the hard knocks coming in a steady stream. At least that is what I took him to mean, and I got busy parlaying it into a general discussion in which Russell, having said his piece, declined to participate further.

Once the other students had risen to the bait and were doing the talking, I had a chance to look Russell over for new damage: this week it was a thick, dark line, resembling lavishly applied lampblack, that ran under his right eye from nose to cheekbone. Another black eye, and this one a prizewinner. One of the quiet dramas of having Russell in class was seeing what kind of punishment he had incurred of late. He was so placid in his manner, so *Bartleby*-like in his pale decency, that I was always jarred by the various lumps, welts, and bruises that passed over his face like weather fronts. Having seen him spar in the gym, I should not have been surprised. He was strong but not quick, and he came straight at his antagonist, equably accepting blows as the price of getting into range to deliver the one-twos he favored. I knew that Russell's style ensured that he would get hit often, even on his best days, but when I saw the marks of his latest lesson on his face, a little click of alarmed recognition still ran through me—registering somewhere in a roped-off area of my mind devoted to boxing—as I managed the discussion and scrawled on the blackboard, chalk dust all over my hands and on the thighs of my pants where I wiped them.

I gestured at the new black eye when Russell stopped to talk with me after class. He just said, "Sterling," looked at the floor, and shook his head, smiling faintly. Sterling was one of the gym's rising stars, a teenager already poised and smooth in the ring. Russell had several years and a few pounds on Sterling, although neither advantage did him much good. Sterling was so preternaturally fast and clever that he had fallen half in love with the idea of his own genius; that—and a tendency to switch back and forth too promiscuously between right- and left-handed stances in order to baffle his opponents—was his only evident weakness. He was the kind of evasive, willowy counterpuncher that solid hitters long to pummel. Russell, for one, believed with doctrinaire intensity that he could hurt Sterling if only he could catch him. I had not seen the two of them spar together, but I had seen Russell's face after their sessions and I had seen both of them spar with others, so I could imagine the encounters:

Russell following Sterling doggedly around the ring, absorbing jabs and the occasional speed-blurred combination as he sought to fix the skinny body and weaving head in his sights long enough to throw a meaningful punch. When Russell drifted far away in thought during class, I assumed he was pursuing Sterling in his mind's eye in the hope of finally nailing him with a big right hand.

On our drive down to the fights later that month, Russell described himself as discouraged about boxing. He had been scheduled to make his first amateur fight in the Golden Gloves, but he had canceled it. He knew he was not ready. I asked if Sterling was still beating him up in the sparring ring, and he said, "Well, yeah, him, but also everybody else. A while ago I was walking around with two black eyes and loose cartilage in my nose and I started to get . . . *discouraged* thinking about it." Russell's stated ambition was to win an official boxing match, not just to spar or fight creditably, but the accumulating pain and damage made him worry that he might be foolish to pursue this goal any further. At the same time, he was wary of giving up too easily, of mistaking for perpetual futility what might be only a difficult period in his fistic education. He said, "When I spar I'm getting really beat up, like, humiliated, in there. I can't get better until I practice more, but I can't practice without getting beat up." I asked why he could not stop now, with no significant damage done, having learned the basics of boxing, having done much to inculcate in himself the generally applicable virtue of disciplined hard work, and having absorbed an instructive dose of the kind of violent extremity from which college usually shelters a young man or woman.

Russell had two answers to that. First, the ever-present threat of pain and humiliation in boxing inspired him to rigor in his training, and he worried that if he stopped going to the gym he would backslide in other endeavors that also required discipline. "When I first got to college," he said, "I slacked off a lot, just hung out and messed around, and it really affected me—my school work, my life. But once I found boxing, I got disciplined about everything. School, eating, sleeping, everything. This week I was getting really discouraged and I didn't go down to the gym at all, and I already felt myself letting things go. You know, falling back into bad habits." Second, he said, discipline aside, "It could turn out that pain and damage are important just by themselves. That's a kind of life experience you can't get as a middle-class college student. Maybe it's worth getting banged up to learn about yourself and, you know, the rest of the world." There were guys down at the gym who had been in jail, who had been addicted to drugs, who had given and taken beatings in and out of the ring, who had been out on the streets broke and without prospects. That was what Russell meant by "life experience."

He seemed to want an argument, so I gave him one. Boxing was not

the only way to sample the world beyond College Hill. Most experience of that world fell somewhere between the extremes of reading about it in books and insisting on getting punched out over and over by experts. Warming to the task, I argued that his fixation on getting hurt as the key to authentic "life experience" took the school out of the school of hard knocks, reducing an education in pugilism to an elaborate form of self-abuse. If ritual humiliation and physical damage became his antidote to slacking off and a sheltered upbringing, wouldn't that formula for gaining "life experience" give him no reason to improve as a boxer? And, anyway, what made boxing necessarily a better path to "life experience" than college? Wasn't college, ideally, supposed to be about exactly the things he saw in boxing: rigorous self-knowledge, encounters with the wider world, the inculcation of discipline? After all, Frederick Douglass presents himself as a student first and a wordsmith last—a reader, writer, and speaker. He disdains boxing, like whiskey-drinking, as a waste of a Sabbath day better spent in learning to read, and he fights only twice—when cornered, rather than going in search of beatings—in a definitively unsheltered life.

Russell said "I see that" and "Right, right" in the way a person does when he means that he has stated his position, he is pleased that you agree it is worth discussing, and there is nothing more to discuss.

We were on our way to see Art Baylis, who also worked out at the Larry Holmes Training Center, fight on the evening's card. Art was getting old in fighter-years. Sometimes in the gym, wrapping his hands before he got to work, he would complain, "I'm tired of this bullshit. I'm not making money, I'm getting all beat up for nothing." The other fighters were sympathetic: it's a rough business, they would agree, nobody here is getting rich. (Actually, Larry Holmes, the heavyweight ex-champion who owned the gym, had been rich for some time, but that was different.) Some tried to jolly Art out of his dark moods, but he would say, "Don't tell me I'm not tired," and they let him be, exchanging smiles behind his back. They knew he would return the next day, or the day after that. Art fought for small purses and worked as a sparring partner for more accomplished veteran fighters or younger men on the way up, men with some money behind them. When he sparred he sometimes wore not just the standard headgear but a mask, a simultaneously futuristic- and medieval-looking helmet made of bright red cushiony material mounted on a rigid frame that fit over his whole head. It had two slits at the eyes and projected out, beaklike, over his nose, mouth, and jaw. He had been cut up over the years and there was no reason to open old wounds in the gym.

Art had turned pro relatively late, in his mid-twenties, and there were gaps in his record, periods of a year and three years in which he had not

fought at all. There was talk of a stretch in the joint and a drug problem that had undercut his development as a fighter. A small, competent heavyweight who also fought as a cruiserweight, he was still solid in the legs. Shirtless, though, he did not look like God in a painting. His chest drooped, unlike those broad armor-plate pectorals proudly sported by men drawn obsessively to the bench press. People who run and lift weights to get buff, who are “into sports” and speak of “intimidation” and “dominating,” might make the mistake of thinking Art was soft and could be overwhelmed by a younger man in better shape. Art knew better. He did best fighting anatomically impressive whippersnappers whose principal investment was in their bodies rather than their craft, men who had the advantage of him *only* in youth and physique. Except when he was chosen as a plausible opponent to lose a fight to a hot property, he was past the point in his career at which he might find himself matched regularly in bouts against genuine talents.

Art was not necessarily quicker or more gifted than the men he beat. Rather, he knew how to fight and had few expectations of glorious success to interfere with his capacity to endure hard times. He had won enough fights to know what it felt like to outlast the other man, but he had been beaten up often enough to know what a well-crafted beating should feel like. He knew the difference between that and a couple of rounds of rough treatment at the hands of an opponent who will soon have overextended himself in the flush of what feels like incipient triumph. Typically, Art lost or split the early rounds, throwing his left jab and hook to the head, holding his right hand in reserve, and weathering the other guy’s best shots. After a couple of rounds of this, once both men had spent the first increments of energy and were taking stock of what remained, just about the time when a younger man had begun to realize with some distress that he was tired and there was still a day’s work to do, Art settled in to win the fight: he began hammering the body with both hands to slow his opponent down and discourage further offense, then went upstairs to the head. When Art won, it was usually by decision rather than knockout.

Some of the victories came easy, most came hard. On the night Russell and I went to see him fight in the ballroom of the Days Inn in Allentown, Art got cut badly in the second round. The other fighter, Exum Speight, was a professional opponent, considerably younger than Art but with more fights and many more losses on his record. The matchmaker had chosen Speight with the expectation that Art would defeat him, but not without a crowd-pleasing struggle. Although Speight rarely won a bout anymore, he had gone the distance with some of the best in the business and he looked the part of a tough guy. While Art’s size and strength resided in his thick legs, Speight’s was in his upper body: bulky shoulders, prominent veins branching across biceps and forearms, a strongbox

of a chest. Speight came out briskly, circling first one way and then the other, firing punches in a commanding rhythm. Art followed him around the ring, eating jabs and throwing left jabs and hooks of his own, looking for an opening to deliver the right. Perhaps because Speight was acting like a man who expected to win, and seemed unaffected by the older man's punches, Art forgot himself. He became impatient and tried his right hand too early, before the younger man's force had been sufficiently denatured by frustration, fatigue, and punishment. Art loaded up leverage to throw a right at the head through what looked like a gap in his opponent's defense, but Speight sensed Art's balance shifting and beat him to the punch. Speight snapped his low-riding left hand up and around to deliver the best blow of the night, a crisp hook that interrupted Art's own slower-developing punch and landed flush to the right side of Art's face. There was old, soft, much-torn scar tissue around the outside corner of Art's right eye, the kind that parts like wet paper when force is applied to it. Blood came up enthusiastically out of the mess, a rich, awful, seductive red under the ring lights. Within seconds it was running down Art's face, getting all over his chest and Speight's gloves, then Art's own gloves and both fighters' trunks. Art's white trunks began to turn pink.

A serious cut seems to change everything. I think of it as making a sound one can almost hear, a droning, keening note that hangs in the smoke-filled air of fight night. The almost-sound is like music played in a difficult, awkward scale and time signature. When blood from a serious cut finds its way into the lights, it is as if some sinister bandleader, black-suited and Fu Manchu'd behind his horn, has cued a frantic, dissonant foray into cut time. The almost-music of cut time strums the optic nerves, vibrates in the teeth; it encourages fighters to do urgent, sometimes desperate things. Spectators, too, shamed and fascinated, plunge headlong into this alien-familiar moment. What was inside and hidden, implicit in the fight, has come outside and taken form.

Art grabbed Speight as often as he could and held him, hoping to make it through the rest of the second round without further damage. To shield the cut, Art put the uncut left side of his face against the left side of Speight's and kept it there in the clinches, which created the illusion that Art was searching the crowd for someone over Speight's shoulder. Unhinged by cut time, I imagined for one bizarre moment that he was trying to make eye contact with me (at ringside) and Russell (back in the crowd somewhere) in order to call on us. "See? 'Life experience.' Discuss." A great slick of fresh blood covered the right side of Art's face, which was stretched into a desperate-looking grimace. It was hard not to believe that he was silently entreating us, the referee—anybody—to stop the fight. But of course he was doing no such thing. Art had an education, not only in fighting but in being hurt, that made the cut a problem to solve. He had

to negotiate the difficulties of cut time while conducting the fight back into more manageable form—a twelve-round blues, say, or the stately largo movement of a concerto that had begun at far too brisk an allegro. He had sprung a leak and he needed to fix it.

Art bled and bled. The ring doctor visited his corner between rounds to inspect the damage. Art's seconds, seasoned practitioners who had worked more illustrious corners in the past, stanching the flow as well as they could, but the cut opened anew as soon as Speight started hitting it in the next round. Art knew he was in danger and picked up the pace, throwing wilder punches with both hands in the hope of hurting his man before the cut would oblige the ring doctor to end the fight. Driven out of his customarily measured boxing style, Art began to make a sobbing, effortful noise as he threw outsized blows. Most of them missed, which caused him to sob more dramatically as he expended even more energy to regain his balance after every staggering miss, but some of his blows hit Speight's guard or landed glancingly on the chin or body. There were so many of them that Speight, instead of counterpunching in earnest to make Art pay for exposing himself so rashly, changed tactics and waited for the older man to run out of steam. Speight made a fort out of his forearms and gloves, risking only an occasional sortie to throw a punch in the lulls between Art's assaults. This went on for another three rounds. Art's blood splattered both fighters, the canvas underfoot, and the judges, functionaries, and reporters at ringside. A slick-haired guy from the boxing commission, seated a few places down from me at the long table abutting the ring apron, pulled up the white tablecloth and tented it over himself to the eyes. Perhaps he was squeamish, or protecting his suit, or worried about AIDS. The referee was awash in the blood, but did not seem to mind; he had been bled on before.

(Later, at the end of the night, the referee used a stopped-up sink in the men's room to soak his shirt. A pale-skinned, beefy fellow with an iron-gray crew cut and copious body hair, he had stripped down to a dark blue sleeveless T-shirt and was kneading his once-light-blue dress shirt in a pool of pink water. He had taken off his black bow tie and once-white surgical gloves and set them at the edge of the sink. One of the gloves, inside-out, seemed to be pointing a finger at the mess in the sink. It looked as if he had performed a successful roadside appendectomy with his car tools on the way home from an evening at the Rotary Club. Men from the audience made wide detours around him on their way to the urinals, all but one of which had backed up and were no longer flushing. The referee patiently did his laundry amid the comings and goings of men, the cigarette smoke, the cloying stink of deodorant cakes in the urinals, and the strong, astringent smell of beer drinkers' piss.)

It took a couple of rounds for the spectators, who flinched every time flying blood caught the lights, to realize that Art was winning the fight.

The mostly inaccurate punching frenzy he embarked upon after suffering the cut gradually wore Speight down, accomplishing the goal Art usually pursued with several more rounds' worth of studied sharpshooting. Speight was probably in better shape than Art, but having a groaning, bloodied maniac flailing after him for long three-minute stretches seemed to drain Speight's energy and resolve. By the fifth round, Speight was no longer circling, no longer throwing many punches. He snapped occasional jabs at Art, but none of them landed near the cut and they did not bother Art much. Art, realizing he had messily accomplished an important task—breaking Speight's initial energy and confidence—and was now ahead of schedule to win by decision, reined himself in but kept up the pressure. He began to land hard, accurate punches and Speight found himself backing sulkily toward the ropes, well behind on points, as usual. Having taken command of the fight, Art threw rights with renewed authority, confident that Speight would not take advantage of the openings for counterpunching that he created. The younger man's offense slacked off to almost nothing. By midfight, Art was no longer bleeding from the cut next to his right eye, and was bleeding only a little from another cut in the scar tissue on the bridge of his nose; Speight, though, bled in a slow, dark flow from both nostrils.

Cut time was over. The black-suited bandleader played a last atonal screech, took his horn from his mouth, and stepped back as the drummer changed pace and kicked into a straight-ahead 4/4 standard: *The Exum Speight Loses Another Fight Blues*.

The fight entered its last movement. Both men tired, and both had gone the distance often enough to be familiar with bone-deep exhaustion, but Art was better at fighting to win in that state. He seemed to welcome fatigue as a condition in his favor, in the way that certain racehorses favor a muddy track. For Speight, being tired was part of a familiar process in which resolve gave way to resignation and, almost inevitably, to the referee raising the other man's taped hand. Experience had formed a rut rather than a reserve in him. One problem with being tough and strong is that the realization of being bested, of feeling the other fighter's hands shaping the bout, comes as a terribly dispiriting shock every time, no matter how often it happens and no matter how familiar it becomes. Speight, having become excited and perhaps even a bit frightened when he saw that Art was badly cut, and having plunged steeply into a depression when Art had not quit because of the cut, now looked as if he had a headache and wanted to go home. But Art—tired as he was and would be, without grandiose prospects but possessed of a thick and instructive past—had found his rhythm. He moved fluidly and with great purpose, cutting off the ring, controlling Speight's movements with jabs and double-jabs, snapping Speight's head back with hard rights. Speight roused himself to hit Art on the chin, a hard shot, after the bell at the

end of the fifth round; Art, unshaken, grinned at him evilly before going back to his corner. Both of them knew that Speight already regarded the fight as lost and done with: if a professional opponent in good fighting trim has gone deep enough into a bout to be genuinely tired, it means he has already earned his paycheck by putting up a creditable battle.

Storybook logic does not apply to tank-town fights. Once Art had the fight in hand, there was no reason for him to get all crazy in trying to knock Speight out. As Art piled up rounds with the judges, he became more careful. By the end he was doing just enough to win every round, and the two men spent the last couple of rounds leaning on one another, for which Speight had a point deducted by the blood-soaked referee. Art won the decision by a wide margin on every judge's card. It had been a difficult job of work, and he had been obliged to do it the hard way, as usual.

Russell did not talk much on the ride back later that night. We sped along the highway in reflective silence. When I got home, having dropped him off along the curving drive that bisected the darkened campus, my wife was sleeping and the house was still. I was living then in Easton, a Pennsylvania college town so quiet that after midnight one can hear traffic on the highway in the distance. Fight night was in my head, strong against the stillness, as I made my way through the dark house and up the stairs: the red gloves and infinitely redder blood, the moving bodies, the ceaseless oceanic sound made by even a small fight crowd, the clarity of every stain and thread under the ring lights, the smoke, the shock of solid punches, the complicated rhythms of clinches and infighting, the high, wavering almost-note of cut time. Bending in front of the bathroom sink to wash my face, I looked in the mirror and discovered that there were bright spots of blood on my pale green shirt. Three more, crusted and almost black, made a kind of Orion's Belt across my forehead. I had already noticed at ringside that there was blood on my notes and my pants. It was almost certainly all Art's, although I suppose some of it could have come from Speight's nose. I washed my face and then I ran water in the sink to soak the shirt.

In the months that followed, Russell found a teacher, a retired fighter who sometimes worked with novices, and eventually declared himself ready to try the Golden Gloves. He was wrong. Russell described his amateur debut as a sort of out-of-body nightmare. He felt himself submerged in a flatfooted torpor in which he moved with desperately inappropriate serenity while the other fighter, unspeakably quick and confident, pounded him at will. Russell was not badly hurt, but he was thoroughly beaten. After the first round, the referee came to Russell's corner to ask if he wished to continue, and he did, but the referee stopped the bout in the second. Feeling himself profoundly out of place

in the ring and in his own body, sustained only by courage once his craft had deserted him, seemingly unable to defend himself or fight back, Russell had frozen in the ring, as novices sometimes do. "I never got started," he told me. "It was like I wasn't even there."

I moved away from Easton soon after, but, back to visit a year later, I dropped by the Larry Holmes Training Center one afternoon. The fighters poured sweat in the late September heat. Stripped to a black tank top and shorts, Art was hitting a heavy bag steadily and well—first the left hand twice, a jab and a hook, then a right cross. Somebody was hitting the other heavy bag very hard; it jumped with each blow, and the thump-crack of sharp punching filled the long, low room. When the second hitter moved around his bag and out from behind Art, I could see it was Russell. There was a new weight and speed in his punching, and he had his legs and shoulders into the making of each punch. His diligence and his teacher's efforts had evidently paid off in an improved command of leverage. He was working on power shots: his left hooks made a perfect L from shoulder to glove, staving in the bag on one side; his straight rights imparted the illusion of animate sensitivity to the bag as it leapt away from the impact. He looked bigger than before, having begun to fill out, but, more than that, he looked looser, more competent, more alert. He had lost the quality of undersea abstraction that had always surrounded him in the gym. There was confident vigor in the way he shoved the bag away so it would swing back at him: he looked forward to its arrival because he was going to hit it just right, with all of himself behind the gloved fist.

I raised an eyebrow at Jeff, a stocky gym regular who worked for the grounds crew up at the college in the mornings and for Larry Holmes in the afternoons. He looked over at Russell, smiled and nodded, and said, "Yeah, Russ has been getting it together. He can *hit*, man. He was in sparring with one of those boys last week and the guy's head was just going like this: bop! bop! bop!" With each *bop!* Jeff threw his head back, chin up, like a fighter getting tagged. One of Holmes's seconds, a round-bodied, characteristically surly fellow named Charlie, chimed in: "Russ can hit. No doubt about it. He had his problems for a while, he got beat up, but he stayed with it and he's getting good. He gets in there this time, he'll surprise some people. Hurt 'em." This was unlooked-for, wildly enthusiastic praise coming from Charlie, who usually ignored the younger fighters in the gym except to shoo them out of the ring when Holmes was ready to work out.

Loyal to one of the gym's most diligent regulars, if not one of its most talented, Jeff and Charlie were talking Russell up to one of his professors, but anyone could see that he had made an important step forward on the way from dabbler to fighter. It looked as if he had arrived at a sense of belonging in the gym, not because he was training next to Art, but be-

cause he was doing it right and knew himself to be doing it right. Maybe the Golden Gloves beating had helped to drive home the lesson that just wanting to be in the ring is not a good enough reason to be there; you have to accept responsibility for your part in the mutual laying on of hands. I expected that Russell would not freeze up in his next fight. He was still slow and hittable, and he might well lose; if he did, however, it would not be because he felt out of place in the ring but because he was outboxed or made mistakes or was simply not quick enough. And if the other guy let Russell start throwing punches, Russell might just give him a beating, or at least a stiff punch or two to remember him by.

When I got back home to Boston I sent Russell an e-mail saying I was pleased to see that he had made such progress in the gym. I admitted I had worried in the past that he would get seriously hurt, perhaps even in a life-changing way, because he was in the gym for the wrong reasons—to absorb “life experience” passively rather than to train actively at a craft—but I was less worried now that he had evidently got down to work in earnest. I was initially surprised, then, when Russell wrote back a couple of weeks later to announce a retirement of sorts:

In earnest, I have become somewhat disenchanted with boxing. There seems to be a level, which I have reached, at which it has lost to some extent its seductive and mesmerizing effect. While I will always retain an interest and awe in the sport, I feel that I can understand the subtleties of the sport and could even execute them given the proper conditioning and practice. While I regard Larry and other successful boxers with the utmost respect and admiration, there seems to be a lack of transcendence into a higher state of more complete perfection in the human realm. Financial gain does not take the fighter out of the street and its culture, nor does it provide him with any solice or real advancement. I may be sounding somewhat highbrow, however, I now realize that I have bigger fish to fry. With my college education quickly coming to a close I need to focus the resource of my time on things which will propell my advancement after graduation. I will certainly remain active in training and boxing but I realistically can no longer give it my full commitment (and just when I was starting to see the fruit of my labor) . . .

Still in need of an appropriate nickname,
Russell

Seduction, proper conditioning and practice, a lack of transcendence, bigger fish to fry, a reapportioning of resources: a college man’s romance with boxing in brief.

Russell’s retirement should not have surprised me. He finished with boxing when he had learned enough—about hitting and about being hit, about other people and himself, about what Douglass and Bartleby had

to say about "life experience"—to understand how fighters submit to being molded by one another. The long line of men who had hit Art in the right eye had contributed to making him a man who could handle cut time. If the line continued to get longer, though, Art would inevitably deform his style to protect the weak spot, leaving new openings for opponents to exploit. Too much of that would cause Art to end up like Exum Speight. The already too-long line of men who had outpunched Speight had taught him to expect defeat and even collaborate in it. Red-blooded convention treats boxing as a matter of one fighter asserting himself forcefully over another, but boxing is just as much a matter of accepting that what you become rests in the hands of others. Or in the hands of orchestrated circumstance: summoned to Allentown to lose a fight, Speight did not set out to initiate cut time in the second round of his bout with Art; he just counterpunched into a hole in the hometown favorite's defense. Had Russell gone further than he did in boxing—and especially had he turned pro, shedding the amateur's protective head-gear—he would have had to accept cut time as a reasonable possibility, a condition likely to be thrust upon a hard hitter who takes too many punches in return. Both Art and Speight, both the man who was cut and the man who cut him, knew themselves to *deserve* cut time. Russell quit before reaching that stage of resignation, but he went far enough that his Golden Gloves opponent, his trainer, and his sparring partners helped him get the feel and the sense of it in his body, where they will persist.

Russell carried six courses in his last semester of college, which left little time for boxing. He said, "I'll spar again, maybe, but I don't think I will fight in the Golden Gloves. I'm too busy, and I'm not as hungry as I was. It's not worth the risk." Art, of course, kept fighting. I have seen him in action twice since then. In the first bout, he suffered a dubious first-round knockout at the hands of an overrated prospect named Baby Joe Mesi. The first time Mesi threw a hard punch, Art went over backwards and lay still, like a Hollywood stuntman leveled by an action hero. It was a record-padder for Mesi, a quick if humiliating payday for Art. In the second bout, a difficult victory of the kind in which Art specializes, he outlasted a bruiser from Philadelphia named Byron Jones. The victory evened Art's lifetime record at thirteen wins and thirteen losses. After sixteen years of hard going in and out of the ring, he had fought the business to a bloody draw.