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Resurrecting The Champ

If Bob Satterfield Packed One of the Greatest Punches of All Time, How Did He End Up on the Streets of Santa Ana? Retracing the Boxer's Path Leads One Man to Confront Many Demons-- Including a Few of His Own.

May 04, 1997 | J.R. Moehringer | J.R. Moehringer is a Times staff writer. He last wrote for the magazine about a fatal car accident involving eight Orange County teenagers

I'm sitting in a hotel room in Columbus, Ohio, waiting for a call from a man who doesn't trust me, hoping he'll have answers about a man I don't trust, which may clear the name of a man no one gives a damn about. To distract myself from this uneasy vigil--and from the phone that never rings, and from the icy rain that never stops pelting the window--I light a cigar and open a 40-year-old newspaper. * "Greatest puncher they ever seen," the paper says in praise of Bob Satterfield, a ferocious fighter of the 1940s and 1950s. "The man of hope--and the man who crushed hope like a cookie in his fist." Once again, I'm reminded of Satterfield's sorry luck, which dogged him throughout his life, as I'm dogging him now. * I've searched high and low for Satterfield. I've searched the sour-smelling homeless shelters of Santa Ana. I've searched the ancient and venerable boxing gyms of Chicago. I've searched the eerily clear memory of one New York City fighter who touched Satterfield's push-button chin in 1946 and never forgot the panic on Satterfield's face as he fell. I've searched cemeteries, morgues, churches, museums, slums, jails, courts, libraries, police blotters, scrapbooks, phone books and record books. Now I'm searching this dreary, sleet-bound Midwestern city, where all the streets look like melting Edward Hopper paintings and the sky like a storm-whipped sea. * Maybe it's fatigue, maybe it's caffeine, maybe it's the fog rolling in behind the rain, but I feel as though Satterfield has become my own 180-pound Moby Dick. Like Ahab's obsession, he casts a harsh light on his pursuer. Stalking him from town to town and decade to decade, I've learned almost everything there is to know about him, along with valuable lessons about boxing, courage and the eternal tension between fathers and sons. But I've learned more than I bargained for about myself, and for that I owe him a debt. I can't repay the debt unless the phone rings.

We met because a co-worker got the urge to clean. It was early January, 1996. The cop reporter who sits near me at the Orange County edition of The Times was straightening her desk when she came across an old tip, something about a once-famous boxer sleeping on park benches in Santa

Ana. Passing the tip along, she deflected my thank-you with an off-the-cuff caveat, "He might be dead."

The tipster had no trouble recalling the boxer when I phoned. "Yeah, Bob Satterfield," he said. "A contender from the 1950s. I used to watch him when I watched the fights on TV." Forty years later, though, Satterfield wasn't contending anymore, except with cops. When last seen, the old boxer was wandering the streets, swilling whiskey and calling himself Champ. "Just a guy that lived too long," the tipster said, though he feared this compassion might be outdated. There was a better-than-even chance, he figured, that Satterfield was dead.

If Satterfield was alive, finding him would require a slow tour of Santa Ana's seediest precincts. I began with one of the city's largest men's shelters. Several promising candidates lingered inside the shelter and out, but none matched my sketchy notion of an elderly black man with a boxer's sturdy body. From there I drove to 1st Street, a wide boulevard of taco stands and bus stops that serves as a promenade for homeless men. Again, nothing. Next I cruised the alleys and side streets of nearby McFadden Avenue, where gutters still glistened with tinsel from discarded Christmas trees. On a particularly lively corner I parked the car and walked, stopping passersby and asking where I might find the fighter from the 1950s, the one who called himself Champ, the one who gave the cops all they could handle. No one knew, no one cared, and I was ready to knock off when I heard someone cry out, "Hiya, Champ!"

Wheeling around, I saw an elderly black man pushing a grocery cart full of junk down the middle of the street. Rancid clothes, vacant stare, sooty face, he looked like every other homeless man in America. Then I noticed his hands, the largest hands I'd ever seen, each one so heavy and unwieldy that he held it at his side like a bowling ball. Hands such as these were not just unusual, they were natural phenomena. Looking closer, however, I saw that they complemented the meaty plumpness of his shoulders and the brick-wall thickness of his chest, exceptional attributes in a man who couldn't be getting three squares a day. To maintain such a build on table scraps and handouts, he must have been immense back when.

More than his physique, what distinguished him was a faint suggestion of style. Despite the cast-off clothes, despite the caked-on dirt, there was a vague sense that he clung to some vestigial pride in his appearance. Under his grimy ski parka he wore an almost professorial houndstooth vest. Atop his crown of graying hair was a rakish brown hat with a pigeon feather tucked jauntily in its brim.

His skin was a rich cigar color and smooth for an ex-boxer's, except for one bright scar between his eyebrows that resembled a character in the Chinese alphabet. Beneath a craggy 5 o'clock shadow, his face was pleasant: Dark eyes and high cheekbones sat astride a strong, well-formed nose, and each feature followed the lead of his firm, squared-off chin. He was someone's heartthrob once. His teeth, however, were long gone, save for some stubborn spikes along the mandible.

I smiled and strolled toward him.

"Hey, Champ," I said.

"Heyyy, Champ," he said, looking up and smiling as though we were old friends. I half expected him to hug me.

"You're Bob Satterfield, aren't you?" I said.

"Battlin' Bob Satterfield!" he said, delighted at being recognized. "I'm the Champ, I fought 'em all, Ezzard Charles, Floyd Patterson--"

I told him I was a reporter from the Los Angeles Times, that I wanted to write a story about his life.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"I count my age as 66," he said. "But 'The Ring Record Book,' they say 72."

"Did you ever fight for the title?"

"They just didn't give me the break to fight for the title," he said woefully.

"If they'd given me the break, I believe I'd be the champ."

"Why didn't they give you the break?"

"You got to be in the right clique," he said, "to get the right fight at the right time."

His voice was weak and raspy, no more than a child's whisper, his words filled with the blurred vowels and squishy consonants of someone rendered senseless any number of times by liquor and fists. He stuttered slightly, humming his "m," gargling his "l," tripping over his longer sentences. By contrast, his eyes and memories were clear. When I asked about his biggest fights, he rattled them off one by one, naming every opponent, every date, every arena. He groaned at the memory of all those beatings, but it was a proud noise, to let me know he'd held his own with giants. He'd even broken the nose of Rocky Marciano, the only undefeated heavyweight champion in history. "He was strooong, I want to tell you," Champ said, chuckling immodestly.

It happened during a sparring session, Champ said, demonstrating how he moved in close, slipping an uppercut under Marciano's left. Marciano shivered, staggered back, and Champ pressed his advantage with another uppercut. Then another. And another. Blood flowed.

"I busted his nose!" Champ shouted, staring at the sidewalk where Marciano lay, forever vanquished. "They rushed in and called off the fight and took Rock away!"

Now he was off to get some free chow at a nearby community center.

"Would you care for some?" he asked, and I couldn't decide which was more touching, his largess or his mannerly diction.

*

"I was born Tommy Harrison," he said, twirling a chicken leg in his toothless mouth. "That's what you call my legal name. But I fought as Bob Satterfield." His handlers, he explained, didn't want him confused with another fighter, Tommy "Hurricane" Jackson, so they gave him an alias. I asked how they chose Bob Satterfield and he shrugged.

As a boy in and around Chicago, he built his shoulders by lifting ice blocks, a job that paid pennies at first but huge dividends years later in the ring. At 15, he ran away from home, fleeing a father who routinely whipped him. For months he rode the rails as a hobo, then joined the Army. Too young to enlist, he pretended to be his older brother, George, paying a prostitute to pose as his mother at the induction center.

He learned to box in the Army as a way of eating better and avoiding strenuous duty. Faced with older and tougher opponents, he developed a slithery, punch-and-move style, which must have impressed Marciano, who was collecting talented young fighters to help him prepare for a title shot against Jersey Joe Walcott. Upon his discharge, Champ became chief sparring partner to the man who would soon become the Zeus of modern boxing. Flicking his big fists in the air, each one glimmering with chicken grease, Champ again re-created the sequence of punches that led to Marciano's broken nose, and we laughed about the blood, all that blood. When he left Marciano's camp and struck out on his own, Champ won a few fights, and suddenly the world treated him like a spoiled prince. Women succumbed, celebrities vied to sit at his side. The mountaintop was within view. "I never really dreamed of being champ," he said, "but as I would go through life, I would think, if I ever get a chance at the title, I'm going to win that fight!"

Instead, he lost. It was February, 1953. Ezzard Charles, the formidable ex-champion, was trying to mount a comeback. Champ was trying to become the nation's top-ranked contender. They met in Detroit before a fair-sized crowd, and Champ proved himself game in the early going. But after eight rounds, his eye swollen shut and his mouth spurting blood, he crumbled under Charles' superior boxing skills. The fateful punch was a slow-motion memory four decades later. Its force was so great that Champ bit clean

through his mouthpiece. At the bell, he managed to reach his corner. But when the ninth started, he couldn't stand.

Nothing would ever be the same. A procession of bums and semi-bums made him look silly. Floyd Patterson dismantled him in one round. One day he was invincible, the next he was retired.

As with so many fighters, he'd saved nothing. He got \$34,000 for the Charles fight, a handsome sum for the 1950s, but he frittered it on good times and "tutti-frutti" Cadillacs. With no money and few prospects, he drifted to California, where he met a woman, raised a family and hoped for the best. The worst came instead. He broke his ankle on a construction job and didn't rest long enough for it to heal. The injury kept him from working steadily. Then, the punch he never saw coming. His son was killed. "My son," Champ said, his voice darkening. "He was my heart."

"Little Champ" fell in with the wrong people. An angry teenager, he got on somebody's bad side, and one night he walked into an ambush. "My heart felt sad and broke," Champ said. "But I figured this happened because he was so hotheaded."

Racked with pain, Champ left the boy's mother, who still lived in the house they once shared, not far from where we sat. "Sometimes I go see her," he said. "It's kind of hard, but somehow I make it."

Park benches were his beds, though sometimes he slept at the shelter and sometimes in the backseat of a periwinkle and navy blue Cadillac he bought with his last bit of money. He missed the good life but not the riches, the fame or the women. He missed knowing that he was the boss, his body the servant. "The hard work," he whispered. "Sparring with the bags, skipping rope. Every night after a workout we'd go for a big steak and a half a can of beer. Aaah."

Finishing his lunch, Champ wrapped the leftovers in a napkin and carefully stowed them in a secret compartment of his grocery cart. We shook hands, mine like an infant's in his. When we unclasped, he looked at the five-dollar bill I'd slipped him.

"Heyyy," he said soulfully. "Thanks, amigo. All right, thank you."

My car was down the block. When I reached it, I turned to look over my shoulder. Champ was still waving his massive right hand, still groping for words. "Thank you, Champ!" he called. "All right? Thank you!"

*

Like Melville's ocean, or Twain's Mississippi, boxing calls to a young man. Its victims are not only those who forfeit their wits and dive into the ring. The sport seduces writers, too, dragging them down with its powerful undertow of testosterone. Many die a hideous literary death, drowning in

their own hyperbole. Only a few--Ernest Hemingway, Jimmy Cannon, A.J. Liebling--cross to safety. Awash in all that blood, they become more buoyant.

For most Americans, however, boxing makes no sense. The sport that once defined the nation now seems hopelessly archaic, like jousting or pistols at six paces. The uninitiated, the cultivated, the educated don't accept that boxing has existed since pre-Hellenic Greece, and possibly since the time of the pharaohs, because it concedes one musky truth about masculinity: Hitting a man is sometimes the most satisfying response to being a man. Disturbing, maybe, but there it is.

Just the sight of two fighters belting each other around the ring triggers a soothing response, a womb-like reassurance that everything is less complicated than we've been led to believe. From brutality, clarity. As with the first taste of cold beer on a warm day, the first kiss of love in the dark, the first meaningful victory over an evenly matched foe, the brain's simplest part is appeased. Colors become brighter, shapes grow deeper, the world slides into smoother focus. And focus was what I craved the day I went searching for Champ. Focus was what made a cop reporter's moth-eaten tip look to me like the Hope diamond. Focus was what I feared I'd lost on the job.

As a newspaper writer, you spend much of your time walking up dirty steps to talk to dirty people about dirty things. Then, once in a great while, you meet an antidote to all that dirt. Champ wasn't the cleanest of men--he may have been the dirtiest man I ever met--but he was pure of heart. He wasn't the first homeless heavyweight either, not by a longshot. Another boxer lands on Skid Row every day, bug-eyed and scrambled. But none has a resume to compare with Champ's, or a memory. He offered a return to the unalloyed joy of daily journalism, not to mention the winning ticket in the Literary Lottery. He was that rarest of rare birds, a people-watcher's version of the condor: *Pugilisticum luciditas*. He was noble. He was innocent. He was all mine.

I phoned boxing experts throughout the nation. To my astonishment, they not only remembered Champ, they worshiped him. "Hardest hitter who ever lived." "Dynamite puncher." "One of the greatest punchers of all time." Boxing people love to exaggerate, but there was a persuasive sameness to their praise. Bob Satterfield was a beast who slouched toward every opponent with murder in his eye. He could have, should have, would have been champion, except for one tiny problem. He couldn't take a punch. "He was a bomber," said boxing historian Burt Sugar. "But he had a chin. If he didn't take you out with the first punch, he was out with the second."

Every fighter, being human, has one glaring weakness. For some, it's a faint heart. For others, a lack of discipline. Satterfield's shortcoming was more comic, therefore more melodramatic. Nobody dished it out better, but few were less able to take it. He knocked out seven of his first 12 opponents in the first round, a terrifying boxing blitzkrieg. But over the course of his 12-year professional career he suffered many first-round knockouts himself. The skinny on Satterfield spliced together a common male fantasy with the most common male fear: Loaded with raw talent, he was doomed to fail because of one factory-installed flaw.

Rob Mainwaring, a researcher at boxing's publication of record, *The Ring* magazine, faxed me a fat Satterfield file, rife with vivid accounts of his fragility and prowess. Three times, Satterfield destroyed all comers and put himself in line for a title shot. But each time, before the big fight could be set, Satterfield fell at the feet of some nobody. In May, 1954, for instance, Satterfield tangled with an outsized Cuban fighter named Julio Mederos, banging him with five fast blows in the second round. When Mederos came to, he told a translator: "Nobody ever hit me that hard before. I didn't know any man could hit that hard." Satterfield appeared unstoppable. Six months later, however, he was stopped by an also-ran named Marty Marshall, who found Satterfield's flukish chin before some fans could find their seats.

Viewed as a literary artifact, the Satterfield file was a lovely sampler of overwrought prose. "The Chicago sleep-inducer," one fight writer called him. "Embalming fluid in either hand," said another. Then, in the next breath, came the qualifiers: "Boxing's Humpty-Dumpty." "A chin of Waterford." "Chill-or-be-chilled." It was a prankish God who connected that dainty jaw and that sledgehammer arm to one man's body, and it was the same almighty jokester who put those Hemingway wannabes in charge of chronicling his rise and fall.

Mainwaring faxed me several photos of Satterfield and one of a wife named Iona, whom he divorced in 1952. The library at *The Times*, meanwhile, unearthed still more Satterfield clippings, including a brief 1994 profile by Orange County Register columnist Bill Johnson. ("Bob Satterfield, one of the top six heavyweight fighters in the world from 1950 to 1956, today is homeless, living in old, abandoned houses in Santa Ana.") From Chicago newspapers, the library culled glowing mentions of Satterfield, including one describing his nightmarish blood bath with middleweight Jake LaMotta, the fighter portrayed by Robert De Niro in Martin Scorsese's 1980 "Raging Bull." Midway through the film, Satterfield's name fills the

screen--then, as the name dissolves, LaMotta-De Niro smashes him in the face.

*

"Mr. LaMotta," I said. "I'm writing a story about an old opponent of yours, Bob Satterfield."

"Hold on," he said. "I'm eating a meatball."

I'd phoned the former champion in Manhattan, where he was busy launching his new spaghetti sauce company, LaMotta's Tomatta. His voice was De Niro's from the film--nasal, pugnacious, phlegm-filled, a cross between Don Corleone and Donald Duck. At last he swallowed and said, "Bob Satterfield was one of the hardest punchers who ever lived."

Reluctantly, I told LaMotta the bad news. Satterfield was sleeping on park benches in Santa Ana.

"You sure it's him?" he said. "I heard he was dead."

"No," I assured him, "I just talked to him yesterday."

"Awww," he said, "that's a shame. He put three bumps on my head before I knocked him out. Besides Bob Satterfield, the only ones who ever hurt me were my ex-wives."

LaMotta began to reminisce about his old nemesis, a man so dangerous that no one dared spar with him. "He hit me his best punch," he said wistfully. "He hit me with plenty of lefts. But I was coming into him. He hit me with a right hand to the top of the head. I thought I'd fall down. Then he did it again. He did it three times, and when nothing happened he sort of gave up. I knocked him on his face. Flat on his face."

LaMotta asked me to say hello to Satterfield, and I promised that I would.

"There but for the grace of God go I," he said. "God dealt me a different hand."

I visited Champ that day to deliver LaMotta's best wishes. I visited him many times in the days ahead, always with some specific purpose in mind. Flesh out the details of his life. Ask a few more questions. See how he was faring. Each time the drill was the same. I'd give him \$5 and he'd give me a big tumble, making such a fuss over me that I'd turn red.

"A boxer, like a writer, must stand alone," Liebling wrote, inadvertently explaining the kinship between Champ and me. To my mind, anyone who flattened Rocky Marciano and put three bumps on Jake LaMotta's melon ranked between astronaut and Lakota warrior on the delicately calibrated scale of bad asses, and thus deserved at least a Sunday profile. To Champ's mind, anyone willing to listen to 40-year-old boxing stories could only be a bored writer or a benevolent Martian. Still, there was something more basic about our connection. As a man, I couldn't get enough of his hyper-

virile aura. As a homeless man, he couldn't get enough of my patient silence. Between his prattling and my scribbling, we became something like fast friends.

Our mutual admiration caused me to sputter with indignation when my editors asked what hard evidence I had that Champ was Satterfield. What more hard evidence do you need, I asked, besides Champ's being the man in these old newspaper photos--allowing for 40 years of high living and several hundred quarts of cheap whiskey? Better yet, how about Champ's being able to name every opponent, and the dates on which he fought them--allowing for an old man's occasional memory lapses?

If the evidence of our senses won't suffice, I continued, let's use common sense: Champ is telling the truth because he has no reason to lie. For being Bob Satterfield, he gets no money, no glory, no extra chicken legs at senior centers and soup kitchens. Pretending to be a fighter forgotten by all but a few boxing experts? Pretending in such convincing fashion? He'd have to be crazy. Or brilliant. And I could say with some confidence that he was neither. Even so, the editors said, get something harder.

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Champ's old house in Santa Ana sat along a bleak cul-de-sac, its yard bursting with cowlick-shaped weeds, its walls shedding great slices of paint. It looked like a guard shack at the border crossing of some desolate and impoverished nation.

An unhappy young woman scowled when I asked to see Champ's ex-girlfriend. "Wait here," she said.

Minutes later, she returned with a message: Go away. Champ's things have been burned, and no one has any interest in talking to you.

Next I tried the Orange County courthouse, hoping arrest records would authenticate Champ. Sure enough, plenty of data existed in the courthouse ledger. Finding various minor offenses under Thomas Harrison, alias Bob Satterfield, I rejoiced. Here was proof, stamped with the official seal of California, that Champ was Satterfield. A scoundrel, yes, but a truthful one. Then I saw something bad. Two felony arrests, one in 1969, one in 1975. Champ had been candid about his misdemeanors, but he had never mentioned these more serious offenses. "Oh, God," I said, scanning the arrest warrant: "Thomas Harrison, also known as Bob Satterfield . . . lewd and lascivious act upon and with the body . . . child under the age of 14 years." Champ molesting his girlfriend's 10-year-old daughter. Champ punching the little girl's aunt in the mouth.

"Did you know [Champ] to be a professional prize fighter?" a prosecutor asked the aunt during a hearing.

"Yes," she said.

"Did you know that he was once a contender for the heavyweight boxing championship of the world?"

Before she could answer, Champ's lawyer raised an objection, which the judge sustained.

Champ pleaded guilty to assaulting the aunt--for which he received probation--and the molestation charge was dropped.

Then, six years later, it happened again. Same girlfriend, different daughter.

"Thomas Harrison, also known as Tommy Satterfield, also known as Bobby Satterfield . . . lewd and lascivious act."

Again, Champ avowed his innocence, but a jury found him guilty. In May 1976, Champ wrote the judge from jail, begging for a second chance. He signed the letter, "Yours truly, Thomas Harrison. Also Known as Bob Satterfield, Ex-Boxer, 5th in the World."

This is how it happens, I thought. This is how a newspaper writer learns to hate the world. I could feel the cynicism setting inside me like concrete. My reprieve from the dirtiness of everyday journalism had turned into a reaffirmation of everything I loathed and feared. My noble warrior, my male idol, my friend, was a walking, talking horror show, a homeless Humbert Humbert.

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He greeted me with his typical good cheer, doffing his hat.

"Hey, Champ, whaddya say!?" he cried. "Long time no see, amigo."

"Hey, Champ," I said, glum. "Let's sit down here and have a talk."

I led him over to some bleachers in a nearby baseball field. We passed the afternoon talking about all the major characters of his life--Marciano, Charles, Little Champ. Abruptly, I mentioned the ex-girlfriend.

"Now that I'm on the outside looking in," he mumbled, "I see she wasn't 100% in my corner."

"Because she accused you of doing those awful things to her baby?"

He lifted his head, startled. He was spent, punch drunk, permanently hung over, but he knew what I was saying. "They just took her word for it," he said of the jury. "The only regret I have in life is that case she made against me with the baby." Only a monster would hurt a child, Champ said. He begged his ex-girlfriend to recant those false accusations, which he blamed on her paranoia and jealousy. And she did recant, he said, but not to the judge.

More than this he didn't want to say. He wanted to talk about Chicago, sweet home, and all the other way-off places where he knew folks. How he

yearned for friendly faces, especially his sister, Lily, with whom he'd left his scrapbook and other papers for safekeeping. He told me her address in Columbus, Ohio, and her phone number. He wanted to see her before he died. See anyone. "Get me some money and head on down the road," he said, eyes lowered, half to himself.

A cold winter night was minutes off, and Champ needed to find a bed, fast. This posed a problem, since taking leave of Champ was never fast. It was hard for him to overcome the inertia that crept into his bones while he sat, harder still to break away from anyone willing to listen. Watching him get his grocery cart going was like seeing an ocean liner off at the dock. The first movement was imperceptible. "See you later, Champ," I said, hurrying him along, shaking that catcher's mitt of a hand. Then I accidentally looked into his eyes, and I couldn't help myself. I believed him.

Maybe it was faith born of guilt. Maybe it was my way of atoning. After all, I was the latest in a long line of people--managers, promoters, opponents--who wanted something from Champ. I wanted his aura, I wanted his story, I wanted his friendship. As partial restitution, the least I could give him was the benefit of the doubt.

Also, he was right. Only a monster would commit the crimes described in those court files, and I didn't see any monster before me. Just a toothless boxer with a glass chin and a pigeon feather in his hat. Shaking his hand, I heard myself say, "Go get warm, Champ," and I watched myself slip him another five-dollar bill.

*

LaMotta would not let up. He refused to let me write. Each time I tried, he swatted me around my subconscious. "Besides Bob Satterfield," he'd said, "the only ones who ever hurt me were my ex-wives." Men seldom speak of other men with such deference, such reverence, particularly men like LaMotta. One of the brashiest fighters ever, he discussed Satterfield with all the bluster of a curtsy. "You sure it's him?" he'd asked, distressed. "I heard he was dead."

You sure it's him? The courts were sure, the cops were sure, the editors were pretty sure. But I was getting ready to tell several million people that Bob Satterfield was a homeless wreck and a convicted child molester. Was I sure?

I phoned more boxing experts and historians, promoters and managers, libraries and clubs, referees and retired fighters, and that's when I found Ernie Terrell, former heavyweight champion. I reached him in Chicago at the South Side offices of his janitorial business.

"You remember Bob Satterfield?" I asked.

"One of the hardest punchers who ever lived," he said.

I've been hanging out with Satterfield, I said, and I need someone who can vouch for his identity. A long silence followed. A tingly silence, a harrowing silence, the kind of silence that precedes the bloodcurdling scream in a horror film. "Bob Satterfield is dead," Terrell said.

"No, he's not," I said, laughing. "I just talked to him."

"You talked to Bob Satterfield."

"Yes. He sleeps in a park not 10 minutes from here."

"Bob Satterfield?" he said. "Bob Satterfield the fighter? Bob Satterfield's dead."

Now it was my turn to be silent. When I felt the saliva returning to my mouth, I asked Terrell what made him so sure.

"Did you go to his funeral?" I asked.

He admitted that he had not.

"Do you have a copy of his obituary?"

Again, no.

"Then how do you know he's dead?" I asked.

Suddenly, he seemed less sure.

"Hold on," he said. "We're going to get to the bottom of this."

He opened a third phone line and began conference-calling veteran corner men and trainers on the South Side. The voices that joined us on the line were disjointed and indistinct, as though recorded on scratchy vinyl records. Rather than a conference call, we were conducting a seance, summoning the spirits of boxing's past. He dialed a gym where the phone rang and rang. When someone finally answered, Terrell asked to speak with D.D. The phone went dead for what seemed a week. In the background, I heard speed bags being thrummed and ropes being skipped, a sound like cicadas on a summer day. At last, a scruffy and querulous voice came on the line, more blues man than corner man.

"Who's this?"

"It's Ernie."

"Ernie?"

"Ernie."

"Ernie?"

"Ernie!"

"Yeah, Ernie, yeah."

"I got a guy here on the other line from the Los Angeles Times, in California, says he's writing a story about Bob Satterfield. You remember Bob Satterfield."

"Suuure."

"Says he just talked to Satterfield and Satterfield's sleeping in a park out there in Santa Ana."

"Bob Satterfield's dead."

"No," I said.

I told them about Champ's encyclopedic knowledge of his career. I told them about Champ's well-documented reputation among cops, judges and reporters. I told them about Champ's face matching old Satterfield photos.

"Then I will come out there and shoot that dude," D.D. said. "Because Bob Satterfield is dead."

Ten minutes later I was in Santa Ana, where I found Champ sweeping someone's sidewalk for the price of a whiskey bottle. It was a hot spring day, and he looked spent from the hard work.

"Look," I said, "a lot of people say you're dead."

"I'm the one," he said, bouncing on his feet, shadowboxing playfully with me. "Battlin' Bob Satterfield. I fought 'em all. Ezzard Charles, Rocky Marciano--"

"Don't you have any identification?" I said, exasperated. "A birth certificate? A union card? A Social Security card?"

He patted his pockets, nothing. We'd been through this.

"In that case," I said, "I'm going to have to give you a test."

Far from offended, he couldn't wait. Leaning into me, he cocked his head to one side and closed his eyes, to aid concentration.

"Who was Jack Kearns?" I asked, knowing that "Doc" Kearns, who managed Jack Dempsey in the 1920s, briefly managed Satterfield's early career.

"Jack Kearns," Champ said. "He was the first manager I ever had."

"All right," I said. "Who's this?"

I held before his nose a 45-year-old wire photo of Iona Satterfield. Champ touched her face gingerly and said, "That's Iona. That's the only woman I ever loved."

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Asked to explain myself, I usually start with my father, who disappeared when I was 7 months old, walked away from his only son the way some people leave a party that's grown dull. At precisely the moment I learned to crawl, he ran. An unfair head start, I always felt.

As a boy, I could repress all stirrings of curiosity about him, because I knew what he sounded like, and this seemed sufficient. A well-known radio man in New York City, he often came floating out of my grandmother's olive-drab General Electric clock-radio, cracking jokes and doing bits, until an adult passing through the room would lunge for the dial. It was thought that The Voice upset me. No one realized that The Voice nourished me. My

father was invisible, therefore mythic. He was whatever I wanted him to be, and his rumbling baritone inspired mental pictures of every male archetype, from Jesus to Joe Namath to Baloo the bear in "The Jungle Book."

Over time, I grew impatient with the mystery surrounding him, the not knowing, particularly when he changed his name and vanished altogether. (Seeing fatherhood and child support as a maximum-security prison, he took a fugitive's pains to cover his tracks once he escaped.) As his absence came to feel more like a constant presence, I spent long hours puzzling about the potential intersections between his identity and mine. My predecessor in the generational parade, my accursed precursor, was a voice. It unnerved me. It unmanned me. One day, shortly before my 17th birthday, I made what felt like a conscious decision to find him. At least, that's what I thought until I met Champ, who forced me to see that no such conscious decision ever took place, that I'd been trying to find my father all my life, that every man is trying to find his father.

True, a love of boxing and a budding disenchantment with daily journalism sparked my original interest in Champ. Then a genuine fondness made me befriend him. But what made me study him like an insect under a microscope was my inescapable fascination with anyone who disappears, dissolves his identity, walks away from fame and family. When pushed to deconstruct my relationship with Champ, I saw that we were trading more than fivers and fellowship. Champ was using me as a surrogate for his dead son, and I was using him as a stand-in for my own deep-voiced demon, whom I met after a brief, furious search.

We sat in an airport coffee shop and talked like strangers. Strangers who had the same nose and chin. I remember random things. I remember that he was the first man I ever made nervous. I remember that he wore a black leather coat, ordered eggs Benedict and flirted relentlessly with the waitress, asking like some fussy lord if the chef made his own Hollandaise sauce. I remember that he was portly and jovial, with wild eyebrows that forked straight out from his head. I remember laughing at his stories, laughing against my will because he could be painfully funny. I remember breathing in his peppery scent, a uniquely male cocktail of rubbing alcohol, hair spray and Marlboro 100s. I remember the hug when we parted, the first time I ever hugged another man.

But what we said to each other over the hours we sat together, I don't know. The meeting was so emotionally high-watt that it shorted my memory circuits. My only other impression of that night is one of all-pervasive awe. My father, my mythic father, had boozed away his future

and parlayed his considerable talents into a pile of unpaid bills. I saw none of that. If losing him was a hardship, losing my mythic idea of him would have been torture. So I chose to see him as a fallen god, an illusion he fostered with a few white lies. I loved him in the desperate way you love someone when you need to.

Now, months after meeting Champ, I asked myself if I wasn't viewing this poor homeless man through the same hopeful myopia. If so, why? The answer dawned one day while I was reading "Moby-Dick," the bible of obsession, which provides a special sort of reading pleasure when you substitute the word "father" for "whale": "It is a thing most sorrowful, nay shocking, to expose the fall of valor in the soul. . . . That immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves . . . bleeds with keenest anguish at the undraped spectacle of a valor-ruined man."

When the valor-ruined man is your father, the anguish quadruples and the manliness hemorrhages. Sometimes the anguish reaches such a crescendo that you simply disobey your eyes. Anything to stanch the bleeding. Because he recalled the specter of my father and his equally enigmatic cop-out, Champ might have revived that early talent I showed for self-deception. He also either benefited or suffered from the trinity of habits that constitutes my father's legacy. An obsession with questions of identity. A tendency to overestimate men. And an inability to leave the past alone.

*

Not every homeless man can look nonchalant speaking into a cellular phone, but Champ acclimated himself to the technology, even if he did aim the phone at that part of the heavens where he imagined Ohio to be. He told his sister he was fine, getting by, and urged her to cooperate. "Please," he said, handing me the phone, "let this man look at my scrapbook." Establishing Champ's credibility was one thing. Establishing mine with his sister was another. Lily couldn't imagine what I wanted from her poor brother, and I couldn't blame her. I tried to explain that Champ merited a newspaper story because he'd contended for the title.

"You remember your brother fighting," I said, "as Bob Satterfield?"

"Yes," she said casually.

"And you have a scrapbook with clippings and photos?"

"I've had that scrapbook for years."

I asked her to mail me the book, but she refused. She wasn't about to ship a family heirloom to someone she'd never met. Again, I couldn't blame her. It was then that I heard from a former boxing writer. He'd been watching TV recently when he hit on something called the Classic Sports Network, which was airing a prehistoric episode of Rocky Marciano's TV show,

wherein Marciano analyzed a 1951 bout at Madison Square Garden between Rex Layne and Bob Satterfield.

When the tape arrived the next morning, I cradled it like a newborn to the nearest VCR. There was Marciano, pudgy and past his prime, a real-life version of Fred Flintstone. Beside him sat his guest, comic Jimmy Durante. After several excruciating minutes of idle chitchat, Marciano turned to Durante and said, "I want to show you the Bob Satterfield-Rex Layne fight." Durante's eyes widened.

"Satterfield?!" he said.

"You remember him?" Marciano asked.

"So help me," Durante said, "he's my favorite. A great, great fighter. I thought he'd be a champion."

"He had the punch, Jim," Marciano said, shaking his head.

The screen went dark. A ring appeared. In the foreground stood a man in a hooded robe, his back to the camera. On either side of him stood corner men in cardigan sweaters, "SATTERFIELD" emblazoned across their backs. Doffing his robe, the fighter started forward, his torso atremble with muscles. Slowly he turned toward the camera, and I saw that he was not Champ. The resemblance was strong, as the resemblance between Champ and old photos of Satterfield had been strong. But they were different men. My stomach tightened as the "real" Satterfield threw a walloping right. Layne dropped to one knee and shook his head, not knowing what hit him. I knew exactly how he felt.

Champ a fake. Somehow I felt less betrayed when I thought he was a child molester. It made me sick. It made no sense. He knew too much about Satterfield. He knew the record. He knew Doc Kearns. He recognized Iona. Plus, he was built like a fighter--that body, those hands. Yes, I thought, he's built like a fighter.

I phoned The Ring and asked Mainwaring to check his records for a heavyweight named Tommy Harrison. Minutes later, he faxed me the file. There, at long last, was Champ. This time, no allowance needed to be made for the passage of years and the corrosive effects of whiskey. That body, those hands.

Besides his name, it seemed, Champ was frequently telling the truth. Not only did he break Marciano's nose, the injury postponed a storied rematch with Walcott. Like Satterfield, he had been a highly touted contender, a guy within striking distance of the championship. Like Satterfield, he had fought Ezzard Charles. In fact, Harrison and Satterfield had fought many of the same men.

Opponents weren't the only thing they had in common. Both were Army veterans. Both were right-handers. Both were built like light-heavyweights. Both were anxious to break into the heavyweight division. Both were clobbered when they tried. Both retired in the mid-1950s. Both were born in November; their birthdays were one day apart.

"He's fast," Marciano said of Harrison in one clipping. "Has a great ring future. In a year or so, if I'm still champ, I expect trouble from him."

The file proved that Champ was a fraud, or delusional, or something in between. But it couldn't explain his motives, nor account for his corroborative sister. In fact, it raised more questions than it answered, including the most pressing question of all: If Champ wasn't Satterfield, who was?

Ernie Terrell said Satterfield was dead. But I couldn't find an obituary--not even in Chicago. How did a fighter of Satterfield's stature not rate a death notice in his native city?

Phone directories in scores of area codes listed hundreds of Satterfields, too many to dial. A search of databases throughout the Midwest found one Illinois death certificate in the name of Robert Satterfield, a truck driver buried in Restvale Cemetery, Worth, Ill. Under next of kin, a son on the South Side of Chicago.

"Robert Satterfield Junior?" I asked when the son answered the phone.

"Yes?"

"I'm writing a story about Bob Satterfield, the heavyweight of the 1950s, and I was wondering if you might be any--"

"That's my father," he said proudly.

*

The neighborhood was dodgy, some houses well kept and others falling down. Few addresses were visible and some street signs were gone, so I drove in circles, getting lost twice, doubling back, and that's when I saw him. Bob Satterfield. In the flesh.

After staring at old newspaper photos and studying the tape of his fight with Rex Layne, I'd committed Satterfield's face to memory--never realizing he might have bequeathed that face to his son. Seeing Satterfield Jr. outside his house, the resemblance fooled me like a mirage, and I did what anyone in my shoes would have done: I backed straight into his neighbor's truck.

The first time I ever laid eyes on Bob Satterfield, therefore, he flinched, as though bracing for a punch.

After making sure I'd left no visible dent, we shook hands and went inside his brick house, the nicest on the block. The living room was neat and

intensely bright, morning sunlight practically shattering the glass windows. He introduced me to his wife, Elaine, who took my hand somewhat timidly. Together, they waved me toward the couch, then sat far away, grimacing.

They were visibly afraid of me, but they did everything possible to make me feel welcome. She was all smiles and bottled-up energy; he was old-school polite, verging on courtly. He'd just finished a double shift at O'Hare, where he loaded cargo for a living, and he actually apologized for his exhaustion. I looked into his basset-hound eyes and cringed, knowing I'd soon add to his burdens.

I started by acknowledging their apprehension. As far as they knew, I'd come all the way from California to ask questions about a fighter few people remembered. It seemed suspicious.

"But the first time I heard the name Bob Satterfield," I said, "was when I met this man."

I dealt them several photos of Champ, like gruesome playing cards, then court papers and clippings describing Champ as Satterfield. Another profile had recently appeared in a college newspaper, and I laid this atop the pile. Lastly, I outlined Champ's criminal past. They looked at each other gravely.

"I hate this man," Elaine blurted.

Satterfield Jr. lit a cigarette and gazed at Champ. He murmured something about a resemblance, then walked to a sideboard, from which he pulled a crumbling scrapbook. Returning to his chair, he balanced the book on one knee and began assembling photos, clippings, documents, anything to help me recognize that Champ's impersonation was no victimless crime.

While I scrutinized the scrapbook, Satterfield Jr. talked about his father's life. He told me about his father's close friends, Miles Davis and Muhammad Ali, who met his first wife through Satterfield. He told me about his father's triumphs in the ring and the difficult decision to retire. (After suffering a detached retina in 1958, Satterfield fled to Paris and studied painting.) He told me about his father's ancestry, back, back, back, and I understood the desperation seeping into his voice, a desperation that made him stammer badly. He'd opened his door to a total stranger who repaid the hospitality by declaring that countless other strangers believed his beloved father was "a valor-ruined man." I'd walked up clean steps to talk to clean people and made them feel dirty.

Lastly, Satterfield Jr. produced his father's birth certificate, plus a 1977 obituary from a now-defunct Chicago newspaper. To these precious items he added a photo of his parents strolling arm in arm, kissing. When I told

Satterfield Jr. about Champ pointing to Iona and calling her "the only woman I ever loved," I thought he might eat the coffee table.

"That somebody would intrude on his memory like this," Elaine said. "My father-in-law was a man. He was a man's man, nothing like the men of today. He was a prideful man. He continued to work up until his operation for cancer. If a person knows he's dying, and he still gets up to go to work, that says a lot about him as a man, and if he knew some homeless man sleeping on a park bench was impersonating him--"

She stopped herself and went to the window, struggling to keep her composure. Satterfield Jr. now began phoning family.

"I'm sitting here with a reporter from the Los Angeles Times," he shouted into the phone, "and he says there's a man in California who's telling everybody he's Bob Satterfield the fighter. He's homeless and he has a very bad record, and he's been molesting children and he's using Pop's name. Yeah. Uh huh. Now, now, don't cry..."

*

An old boxing hand once said, "You never learn anything until you're tired," and by that criterion I'm capable of learning plenty right now. After the overnight flight, after the cab ride through the rainy dawn to this downtown Columbus hotel, I'm tired enough to understand why Champ's sister doesn't trust me, and why she's turned me over to Champ's nephew, Gregory Harrison, who trusts me even less. I left word for him two hours ago saying I'd arrived, but he seems like a guy who'd rather give me a stiff beating than a straight answer, so the chance of seeing Champ's scrapbook seems remote.

Above all, I'm tired enough to understand that Champ isn't Satterfield, never was Satterfield, never will be, no matter how hard I try. But I'm also tired enough to understand why he pretended to be Satterfield. He became Satterfield because he didn't like being Tommy Harrison.

It was Satterfield Jr. who made me appreciate how ripe his father was for imitation. Fast, stylish, pretty, Satterfield was Champ's superior in every way. He was the ballyhooed one, the better one. Yes, he had the famously weak chin. But he led with it, time after time, meaning he had one hellacious heart. Champ must have studied Satterfield from afar, longingly, as I did. He must have gone to school on Satterfield, devouring facts about his life, as I did. He must have viewed Satterfield as a model, an ideal, as I also did. One day, Champ must have spied Satterfield across a musty gym, perhaps with Doc Kearns, or a smoky nightclub, where Iona was the prettiest girl in the joint, and said, "Ah, to be him." From there, it was a short, dizzy trip to "I am him."

As a man, you need someone to instruct you in the masculine verities. Your father is your first choice, but when he drops out, you search for someone else. If you're careless, the search creeps into your psyche and everyone becomes a candidate, from homeless men to dead boxers. If you're careless and unlucky, the search devours you. That doppelganger eats you up. "One of the primary things boxing is about is lying," Joyce Carol Oates writes in "On Boxing." "It's about systematically cultivating a double personality: the self in society, the self in the ring."

What Champ did, I think, was sprout a third self, a combination of the two, which may be what Champ has been trying to tell me all along.

After Chicago, I wanted to scold him about the people his lies were hurting. But when I found him wearing a 10-gallon cowboy hat and a polo shirt with toothbrushes stuffed in the breast pocket, my anger drained away.

"Champ," I said, "when you pretended to be Bob Satterfield, weren't you afraid the other Bob Satterfield would find out?"

Without hesitating, he put a hand to his chin and said, "I always figured the other Bob Satterfield knew about me. As long as everyone got paid, I didn't think the other Bob Satterfield would mind."

"What?"

"This is just you and me talking," he said. "But my manager, George Parnassus, he told me like this here: 'If you go to fight in Sioux City, Iowa, and you say you is Bob Satterfield, then you get a big crowd, see? But if you say you is Tommy Harrison, and like that, you only get a medium-size crowd.' "

Champ's manager had been dead 20 years. But his son, Msgr. George Parnassus, was pastor of St. Victor's Roman Catholic Church in West Hollywood. I phoned Parnassus and told him about Champ, then asked if his father might have staged bogus fights in the 1950s. Before TV came along, I ventured, most fighters were faceless names in the dark, so it might have been easy, and it might have been highly profitable, to promote look-alike fighters in out-of-the-way places. Say, Sioux City.

"Why do you say Sioux City?" he demanded.

"Because Champ said Sioux City."

"My father moved to Sioux City in the 1950s and staged fights there for a number of years."

Which is why I'm in Columbus this morning. I owed it to Champ to take one last stab at the truth. I owed it to myself. More than anyone, I owed it to Satterfield, whose absence I've come to feel like a constant presence.

"I've had a lot of disappointments," Satterfield told a reporter in 1958, sitting in a hospital with his detached retina. "I don't remember all the

disappointments I've had." Maybe, 40 years later, he's still disappointed. Maybe he knows someone swiped the only shiny prize he ever had--his good name--and he can't rest until he gets it back. All this time, I've been casting Satterfield as Moby Dick, myself as Ahab. Now I'm wondering if Satterfield is the real Ahab, and Champ the whale. Which makes me the harpoon.

The phone rings.

"I'm downstairs."

*

Champ's nephew is sitting in the middle of the lobby, unaware or pretending to be unaware that people are staring. It's not that he looks out of place, with his floor-length black leather overcoat and gold-rimmed sunglasses. It's that he looks famous. He also looks like a younger, fitter, toothier version of Champ.

He shakes my hand tentatively and we duck into the hotel restaurant. The place is closed, but a waiter says we're welcome to have coffee. We sit by a rain-streaked window. I thank him for meeting me, but he whips off his sunglasses and stares.

"I'm not here for you," he says. "I'm here for my Uncle Tommy. And before I tell you anything you need to know, I need to know from you why you would get on a plane and fly all night, come all the way from California, to Columbus, Ohio, to write a story about my uncle?"

I try explaining my complicated relationship with his uncle, but the subject makes me more mumbly than Champ. Interrupting, he says softly: "Uncle Tommy was the father I should have had."

He tells me about the only time he met his uncle, a meeting so charged that it defined his life, and I wonder if he notices the strange look on my face.

"My Uncle Tommy was like the Last Action Hero," he says. "I wanted to be just like him."

"You were a boxer," I say.

"I was a sparring partner of Buster Douglas," he says, sitting straighter.

His nickname was Capital City Lip, but everyone nowadays calls him Lip. With the waiters watching, he throws his right, jabs his left, bobs away from an invisible opponent, taking me through several hard-won fights, and I'm reminded of the many times his uncle broke Marciano's nose for my enjoyment.

"When you hit a guy," he says dreamily, "when you hit him in the body, you demean his manner, you know? You sap his strength, you impose your will on him. I was in the tippy-top physical shape of my life! No one could beat me! I was good!"

"What happened?"

He purses his lips. His story is Champ's story, Satterfield's story, every fighter's story. One day, there was someone he just couldn't beat.

"Now I race drag bikes," he says.

"Drag bikes? Why?"

"Because someday I want to be world champion of something."

His father got him interested, he says, mentioning the man in a curious way. "My father walks down the street, people part ways," he says. "Big George, that's what everyone in Columbus calls my father. He was a boxer, too, although he didn't go as far as Uncle Tommy."

Feeling an opening, I try to tell Lip about my father. He seems confused at first, then instantly empathetic. He understands the link between boxing and growing up fatherless. Maybe only a boxer can fathom that kind of fear.

"Have you ever heard the name Bob Satterfield?" I ask.

"Yes, I have heard that name."

As a boy, Lip often heard that Uncle Tommy fought as Bob Satterfield, but he never knew why.

He promises to bring me Champ's scrapbook tomorrow, then take me to meet his father. I walk him outside to his Jeep, which is double-parked in a tow zone, hazard lights flashing, just as he left it three hours ago.

*

White shirt, white pants, white shoes, Lip comes for me the next morning looking like an angel of the streets. As we zoom away from the hotel, I scan the backseat, floor, dashboard. No scrapbook. The angel shakes his head.

"Aunt Lily just doesn't trust you," he says. "I was over there all morning, but she won't let that book out of her house."

I groan.

"I looked through the book myself, though," he says, lighting a cigarette, "and I don't think it has what you want. This Bob Satterfield, the book has lots of newspaper articles about his career, and there's a picture of him with my uncle--"

I wince.

"--and an article saying Satterfield and my Uncle Tommy were scheduled to fight."

Disconsolate, I stare at the bullet hole in the windshield.

We drive to Lip's father's house, where a candy-apple red Cadillac the size of a fire engine sits outside, license plate "BIG GEO." Lip takes a deep breath, then knocks. Whole minutes crawl by before the door flies open and Champ's brother appears. He looks nothing like Champ, mainly

because of old burn scars across his face. But wrapped in a baby blue bathrobe and glowering hard, he does look like an old boxer. He turns and disappears inside the house. Meekly, we follow.

Off to the left is a small room crammed with trophies and boxing memorabilia. To the right seems to be the living room, though it's impossible to tell because all the lights are off. Big George keeps moving until he reaches a high-backed chair. Despite the oceanic darkness of the place, he remains clearly visible, as if lit from within by his own anger. I can see why he's such a force in Lip's life. He scares the wits out of me. Rubbing his palms together, Lip tells his father I'm writing a story about Uncle Tommy.

"Hmph," Big George scoffs. "Tommy. He's a stranger to me. He's my brother and I love him, but he's a stranger."

"Have you ever heard the name Bob Satterfield?" I ask.

"Bob Satterfield," Big George says, "was one of the hardest punchers of all time--"

He coughs, a horrifying cough, then adds:

--but he couldn't take a punch."

"Do you remember Tommy ever fighting as Bob Satterfield?" I ask.

"Tommy never fought as nobody else."

He stands and goes to a sideboard, where he rifles through a stack of papers and bills. "Here," he says, yanking loose a yellowed newspaper account of the night in 1953 when Champ's life began its downward spiral.

"Tommy wasn't ready for Ezzard Charles," Big George says with sudden tenderness while Lip and I read over his shoulder. "They rushed him."

The three of us stand together, silently, as though saying a prayer for Champ. Then, without warning, Lip breaks the mood, mentioning a beef he's having with Big George. They start to argue, and I see that Lip brought me here for more than an interview. He's hoping I can play referee. As with Champ, I was too busy using him to notice that he was using me.

Father and son argue for five minutes, each landing heavy verbal blows.

Then Big George makes it plain that these will be the final words spoken on the subject.

"The Bible say this," he bellows. "Honor your parents! Honor your mother and father! Regardless what they say, what they do, all mothers and dads love their children! All of them!"

"He's lying to you," Lip says when we get in the car.

I look at him, startled.

"About what?"

"He knows all about Satterfield."

We drive to a beloved old gym that former champion Buster Douglas helped rebuild after knocking down Mike Tyson. Inside, we find Douglas' father, Bill, training a young featherweight. When Lip tells Douglas that I'm writing about his uncle, "a former heavyweight con-TEN-der," Douglas nods his head several times, and I feel Lip's self-worth balloon with each nod.

We watch the featherweight work the heavy bag, a black, water-filled sack that hangs from the ceiling. Each time he snaps a hard right, the bag swings like a man in a noose. His name is Andre Cray, and he's 25. Rawboned and scowling, with a flat head and rubbery limbs, he looks like an angry Gumby. When his workout ends, we ask him why he chose boxing as a trade.

"To me it's like an art," he says quietly, unwinding the padded white tape from his fists.

But this isn't the real reason, he admits. Growing up without money, without a father, boxing was the only straight path to manhood. Many of his friends chose the crooked path, a choice they didn't always live to regret. Those who prospered in the crack trade often gave Cray money and begged him not to follow their lead. Some even bought him gloves and shoes, to make sure the streets didn't claim another boxer.

He remembers those early patrons, uses their fate as inspiration. His future is bright, he figures, if he can just protect his chin and not lose heart. In 19 fights, he's scored 17 wins. When he loses, he says, the anguish is more than he can stand.

"You have family?" Lip asks.

"Yeah," Cray says. "I have a son. He'll be 1 on Tuesday."

"What's his name?"

"Andre Cray Junior."

"I imagine he inspires you a lot."

"Yeah," Cray says, looking down at his oversize hands.

Lip nods, solemn. Douglas nods. I nod.

*

Like a favorite movie, the one-reel "Satterfield Versus Layne" says something different every time I watch, each punch a line of multilayered dialogue. After several hundred viewings, the core theme emerges. It's about pressing forward, I think. Ignoring your pain. Standing.

"Satterfield is out of this world," Marciano says in his narrative voice-over.

"He's one of the hardest hitters I've ever seen."

Satterfield lives up to his reputation in the very first minute, greeting Layne with a vicious second-clefter on the point of the chin. Kneeling,

Layne takes the count, then staggers upright and hugs Satterfield until the bell.

Satterfield, in white trunks, with a pencil-thin mustache and muscles upon muscles, is a joy to look at. Decades before Nautilus, his biceps look like triple-scoop ice cream cones. By contrast, Layne looks like a soda jerk who's wandered mistakenly into the ring. Over the first three rounds he does little more than push his black trunks and flabby belly back and forth while offering his square head as a stationary target.

Still, Layne seems the luckier man. In the sixth, Satterfield puts every one of his 180 pounds behind a right hook. He brings the fist from behind his back like a bouquet of flowers, but Layne weaves, avoiding the punch by half an inch. "Just missed!" Marciano shouts. "That would have done it!" Had that punch landed, everything would be different. Layne would be stretched out on the canvas, Satterfield would be looking forward to the title shot he craves. Instead, the eighth begins, and Satterfield's wondering what more he can do. It's LaMotta all over again. No matter what you do, the other guy keeps coming--obdurate, snarling, fresh.

Far ahead on points, Satterfield can still win a decision, as long as he protects himself, covers up, plays it safe. He does just the opposite, charging forward, chin high, the only way he knows. In the kind of punch-for-punch exchange that went out with fedoras, Satterfield and Layne stand one inch apart, winging at each other from all directions, Satterfield trying frantically to turn out Layne's dim bulb--until Layne lands a right hook on the magic chin.

"I don't think [he] can get up," Marciano says as Satterfield lies on his back, blinking at the house lights. "But look at this guy try."

Boxing's Humpty-Dumpty. The book on Satterfield proves true. Or does it? Always, this is the moment I hit the pause button and talk to Satterfield while he tries to tap some hidden wellspring of strength. Somehow, he taps it every time, a display of pure grit that never fails to make my heart beat faster.

"He's hurt bad," Marciano says, as Satterfield stands and signals the referee that he's ready for another dose. Dutifully, Layne steps forward and sends a crashing left into Satterfield's head. Then a right. And another right. Finally, the referee rushes forward and removes Satterfield's mouthpiece. Corner men leap into the ring. Photographers with flashes the size of satellite dishes shoot the covers of tomorrow's sports pages. Amid all the commotion, Layne takes a mincing step forward and does something shocking.

It's hard to believe, in an age of end-zone dances and home-run trots, that boxers in a bygone era often hugged after their meanest fights. (Some actually kissed.) But Layne gives that post-fight tenderness a new twist. As Satterfield sags against the ropes, dead-eyed, Layne reaches out to touch him ever so lightly on the cheek.

It's a haunting gesture, so intimate and unexpected that it begs imitation. Like Layne--like Champ--I want to reach out to Satterfield, to show my admiration. I want to tell him how glad I am to make his acquaintance, how grateful I am for the free instruction. More than all that, I suppose, I just want to thank him for the fight.

One day, after watching his greatest defeat, I visit his impostor.

"Heyyy," Champ says, beaming, waving hello. "What do you know about that? Hey, your picture ran through my mind many times, and then I'd say, well, my friend, he give me up."

He's wearing a white karate uniform, mismatched sneakers and a shirt from the Orange County Jail. Clouds of flies swarm around his head and grocery cart this warm November afternoon, Champ's 67th birthday. Tomorrow would have been Satterfield's 73rd.

There are many things about Champ that I don't know, things I'll probably never know. He either got money to be Satterfield, then forgot to drop the con, or wished he were Satterfield, then let the wish consume him. Not knowing doesn't bother me as I feared it would. Not getting his scrapbook doesn't torment me as I thought it might. Every man is a mystery, because manhood itself is so mysterious; that's what Champ taught me. Maturity means knowing when to solve another man's mystery, and when to respect it.

"Been traveling," I tell him. "And guess where I went?"

He cocks his head.

"Columbus. And guess who I saw? Your nephew, Gregory."

"That's my brother's son!"

"Yep. And guess who else I met. Big George."

He pulls a sour face, like his brother's, and we both laugh.

We talk about George, Lily and Lip, and Champ grows heavy with nostalgia. He recalls his childhood, particularly his stern father, who hit him so hard one day that he flayed the muscle along Champ's left bicep. Champ rolls up his sleeve to show me the mark, but I look away.

To cheer him up, to cheer us both up, I ask Champ to tell me once more about busting Marciano's nose.

"Marciano and I were putting on an exhibition that day," he says, crouching. "We were going good. But he had that long overhand right, and

every time I seen it coming, I'd duck it. And I'd come up, and I'd keep hitting him on the tip of his nose."

He touches my nose with a gentle uppercut, flies trailing in the wake of his fist.

"On the tip, on the tip, I kept hitting," he says. "Finally, his nose started bleeding, and they stopped the fight."

Smiling now, more focused than I've ever seen him, Champ says he needs my advice. He's been reviewing his life lately, wondering what next. Times are hard, he says, and maybe he should head on down the road, polish up the Cadillac and return to Columbus, though he fears the cold and what it does to an old boxer's bones.

"What do you think?" he says.

"I think you should go be with people who love you and care about you," I say.

"Yeah, that's true, that's true."

We watch the cars whizzing by, jets roaring overhead, strangers walking past.

"Well, Champ," I say, slipping him \$5. "I've got to get going."

"Yeah, yeah," he says, stopping me. "Now, listen."

He rests one of his heavy hands on my shoulder, a gesture that makes me swallow hard and blink for some reason. I look into his eyes, and from his uncommonly serious expression, I know he's getting ready to say something important.

"I know you a long time," he says warmly, flashing that toothless smile, groping for the words. "Tell me your name again."