

DAVID RABE

They Steal Your Sweat

Some Prizefights I Have Seen

IT IS NOT THEATER, yet it is theatrical. The crowds yell and they are vulnerable emotionally. The fight is real, yet it mimes other struggles. Lacking language, it unfolds in movement. The lights glare and there are themes, patterns, illuminations. The match brings two men into conflict, each having a style that renders an aspect of human character in action. It is the minute-by-minute development of this confrontation that produces a match's greatest interest, for something of the essential nature of each man is revealed and the meaning and outcome of their being combined is, for the first time, made known. In a stark and most basic way, it mimes the wars men conduct against one another and within themselves. Though the blows struck are real, they are not deadly. A man knocked out is down only briefly. The mime is of death and all the other losses people face. He will get up again and make a show of good health not unlike the actor who, having died in the play, returns to take his curtain call. A fighter is not unlike an actor in another way, too, for he goes into the ring with more than one identity. He enters as himself but he is shadowed by another character, a kind of double known and harbored in the minds of the observers. He is of course no more than a man with a personality familiar to those who sit at his breakfast table, and yet, if he lasts at his business long enough, he will become known by an additional, public, somewhat mythological persona. Writers and others concerned with legend and language will develop this second identity for him, though he will contribute his skill, talent, and style, a factual background and fundamental nature from which this doppelgänger of sorts is concocted. Furthermore, he will have run a gauntlet of harsh battles with increasingly dangerous men, if he is to rise. When he wins, he steals dimensions that these men have stolen from others. His stature is fleshed out and illuminated by the reputations of all those he has beaten.

Charles Liston, for example, was known as "Sonny," as "The World's Baddest Man" and "The Bear." It was as if his life and prowess, despite his rudimentary impression, could not be contained within any single

invention. In the beginning he was the phantom that fight fans feared meeting on a dark city street or back alley, particularly if those fans were white. Until a day late in 1969, when his career for all intents and purposes ended in Las Vegas, crowds marveled at his presence. Though twice beaten by Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali, he seemed to have defeated time. His exact age was unknown. In 1970, claiming to be thirty-seven, he could have been closer to fifty, hedging by a decade, and yet he ruined almost every fighter other than Clay/Ali to enter the ring with him. He was “The Bear”—the fighter of the 1960s who was most distant in manner and style from the virtues society in that era, or at least the white faction, liked to think it valued. An ex-con who’d been sentenced to the Missouri State Penitentiary for armed robbery, he did nine months for assaulting a police officer later on.

He wasn’t graceful or quick; he didn’t dance and work off an intelligent plan. He used a fierce clubbing left jab with a fourteen-inch fist to knock people back as he plodded in looking to stun them with a hook so he could get them with his right. Or vice versa. If he wanted to be respected, loved, or admired, he learned early to forget the idea. If he ever harbored such hopes, his brutal defeat of Floyd Patterson, whom even the NAACP viewed as the standard-bearer of virtue that night in 1962, cast him as a villain. His adopted hometown of Philadelphia shunned him in the bitter aftermath, all but running him out of town. If that response angered and bewildered him, which it probably did, he faced it with his trademark scowl. It wasn’t all that different from much else in his life. Raised in a brutal strip of Arkansas in a family overflowing with siblings, he once commented, “My old man never gave me anything but a beating.” He could not read or write, but he knew how to keep people at bay with his glare.

He never seemed to understand the extravagant sideshow that came along with the fight game, but he could box, so he did. He may not have liked the work and pain, but he wanted the money. Facing another worried creature, he went after it to get rid of it. An opponent was an obstacle, not a challenge, a dangerous sack of meat that wanted to hurt him and that he went after because it was in the ring at the same time he was.

In late 1968, he went up against an old sparring partner, Amos “Big Train” Lincoln. Almost immediately Lincoln was in trouble, his hands down at his hips and huge fists crashing into his head. Suddenly he went down and got up. He seemed bemused and stood as if he could not quite recall the purpose for which he had arisen. A towel fluttered in from the direction of his corner. It might have been thought to mean the fight

was over, his corner having surrendered. The referee apparently decided it meant only that Lincoln's corner men were sloppy; he kicked it aside, and two fists smacked Lincoln like thudding baseballs. He fell like a dead man with Sonny watching only long enough to determine that his work was done and that this one wasn't getting up to come after him. It was the way he had twice walked away from a beaten Floyd Patterson, having knocked senseless not only Patterson but sentimental America's public narrative regarding good and evil, white hats and black hats. Though it may not have been in Sonny's mind to call his countrymen on their hokum, such a passion was smoldering in other souls. The civil rights movement was brewing. Watts and Detroit would soon burn. Along with Patterson, a sanctimonious cliché lay sprawled on the canvas. Sonny had let them know what was coming, namely that those they deemed "bad" could sometimes crush their designated heroes. Not that anything could eliminate hokum fully and permanently from the American psyche, but it did slink away into hiding for a time.

Liston's attraction was blunt like his style. It resided in the seeming simplicity to which he had reduced the conduct of his life. He let nothing nonessential touch him. He hit the other man until the other man fell down or, as many believed in the case of the two Ali fights, Liston tired of wielding those big arms, or became frustrated, or took a dive on orders from men more powerful than he; or perhaps he was compelled by a whim no one else could fathom. In one case, he refused to fight on, and in the other he floated down onto his back on the canvas, almost politely placing his hands on either side of his head, while the referee counted and somehow lost track. Sonny didn't seem unduly concerned with convincing anyone he was out cold, rolling onto his belly, then starting to rise, then flopping back down. A lot more than ten seconds had passed, though no one seemed to know it, least of all the referee. It took longer than made sense for the fight to be ruled over, with Liston counted out. But finally he could go and take his money with him. To anyone who questioned him, he said he'd been hit hard, what did they know, all the while his baleful stare told them they were disappointing him at the same time that it said, "Fuck you."

On June 23, 1969, Joe Frazier and Jerry Quarry, two young heavyweights, came to Madison Square Garden to struggle for the highest prize they could hope to attain. Frazier was there to hang on to the championship, while Quarry had come to take it away. They were twenty-three and twenty-four years old, ages at which most young career men—doctors,

lawyers, engineers, etc.—are still undergoing professional training. These two were already at the peak and the turn toward the end. The four preliminaries were rugged and varied, but as a whole they served to prepare for the main event. Showing the rudiments of boxing, its rawness and dangers, they were a tutorial, each succeeding fight becoming more advanced so that the spectator would be primed to recognize the excellence at the top. They demonstrated the distillation a young fighter's nerve must survive if he is to rise, and they highlighted also, to an uncomfortable degree, the far-reaching hold money has on the game.

In the first of two significant prelims, Mike Quarry, Jerry's younger brother, battled a tough Ruben Figueroa and came away with a split decision. But it was not easy to slip the thought that Mike had been handed the victory for reasons extraneous to his fight. One sensed a desire to maintain heightened tension in the evening by keeping the "Quarry" name connected only with winning. For the next prelim a huge bundle of future dollars stepped up. George Foreman, the flag-waving Olympic heavyweight champion, was making his professional debut. They shoved Donald Waldheim, a full-time printer, part-time fighter, out to meet him. He looked pasty, out of shape, and thirty pounds lighter. Foreman devoured him. As no "Quarry" would be allowed to fail early in the evening, Foreman's promoters were not about to risk defeat, or even a legitimate challenge at the start of his career.

As the main event grew near there were attempts at ceremony in the high egg of the Garden. The "Star-Spangled Banner" played and former champions, along with the present champions in other weight divisions and assorted contenders, were introduced in a mechanical way that hoped to resemble enthusiasm. Excitement was present and poised but withholding its powers, and then Quarry bounced up the ring steps, moving with ease and wearing a blue, two-dollar golf hat. The crowd beheld him with a shout. Fighters in those years did not indulge in decorative paraphernalia. They wore trunks, a cup, gloves, shoes, and a robe. The oddsmakers had picked Frazier to win. Quarry, with his blue hat, was thumbing his nose at their prediction. He was there to win. He was not only declaring but demonstrating that what was sanctioned could be shattered. It was as if he had shouted that by breaking this protocol he guaranteed he would demolish the biggest expectation of the card, Frazier's victory. If it already existed in the minds of most observers, which it did, he was advising them to get ready for a big surprise. Now the crowd, its senses heightened by this flair and audacity, watched Frazier arrive.

The prefight choreography familiar to anyone who has ever watched boxing consists of each man either feigning indifference to the other or posturing threateningly. Frazier let loose the danger of his hands. Quarry, drifting to his right, bounced and fired off a series of shots that threw sparks into the buzzing crowd. More than a few of those excited fans viewed Quarry as “The White Hope,” the white fighter most capable of winning the heavyweight crown. But Quarry wanted nothing to do with their label. If he bore an allegiance to any club anywhere it was to the brotherhood of fighters, black or white, he didn’t care. His heart was set on a destination that lay beyond the man in front of him, Joe Frazier, who stood like a boulder blocking the way. The son of a sharecropper, Frazier knew a rough world from the day he was born; he’d grown up working the cotton fields of South Carolina and now he was the essence of an overweight boy melted down to the hard core of a strong-minded man.

When the fighters faced each other in the middle of the ring while the referee ran his monotone of rules, their mood put ice in the air. Taller by an inch and a half, Quarry had journeyed long through wear and worry to reach this moment. As he stood toe to toe with Frazier, his father’s motto, “There’s no quit in a Quarry,” couldn’t have been far from his mind, whether he thought of it or not. Years before, his father, Jack, had tattooed “Hard” and “Luck” on his son’s left and right hands. Throughout most of his life, Jack Quarry was an itinerant housepainter, who claimed that he taught his sons fighting early so they would never have the energy to steal. Jerry went to nearly thirty different schools between the second and the eleventh grades. He broke his knuckles seventeen times; he broke his back, had a ruptured appendix, nephritis, a broken arm, a cracked ankle, an ulcer. In the recent World Boxing Association championship, he fought fifteen rounds against Jimmy Ellis while suffering from a cracked vertebra in his spine. People called him a bum after the loss. He had wanted to counterpunch, hoping to take sudden advantage of the vulnerability that aggression can sometimes create, but Ellis would not attack. So he waited for a chance that never came and looked like a man who didn’t want to fight.

The moment felt primed to bring forth something memorable, as the two men walked from the referee back to their corners, and then the bell put them to work. Shoulders hunching, Quarry thumped and pounded. Frazier retreated. Quarry looped fists into the stomach and ribs. Frazier, backing away, nearly fell through the ropes. Suddenly he cracked back at Quarry’s head, but Quarry didn’t falter. In prefight interviews, he had

said he could take Frazier's best punches and deliver blows more potent. When performing this feat in his mind, he found no need to do as his trainers advised in camp, to lay back and move and stay away until he found openings. Preparing for this fight, Quarry defined himself as a puncher, a brawler. This was Frazier's reputation and perhaps the epithet Quarry desired even more than that of champion. Now he was walking into reality embodied in his vision: I am the one who hits harder, cuts less, takes more battering. That was his claim and he was delivering the finest that he had on the gamble that it was the best there was. Failure would bring nothing less than the reality of his own inadequacy. But he didn't dare follow the advice of those close to him. If he hit and moved, stayed away and counterpunched, he risked the ridicule that had smeared him in the wake of his Ellis bout. He was exorcising the voices of the men who had derided him. He was pounding these ghosts from his own brain as he pounded Frazier.

At the bell for round 2 the crowd shouted and the men slammed at each another with Frazier becoming slowly, strangely, and nearly imperceptibly a burden Quarry could not quite bear. It was like a change in the wind. Quarry yielded some territory. He took in a long, necessary breath, part sigh, and settled back to work.

The crowd murmured through the minute before round 3. They had witnessed Frazier get hit with solid, shoulder-powered shots that did nothing to stall his advance. Quarry had generated these blows and knew their intent. He had felt their impact rattle his own nerves. Concern must have whispered, however faintly, that the man he had envisioned beating was not the one in the ring. This was another man and he did not falter when you hit him and though he had yet to damage you, he waded through what you did to him, crowding and oppressing you. These first six minutes of combat could not have left Quarry empty of new knowledge, and so he must have thought to change his plan, accept the evidence, turn the fox, stick and move, and then he must have decided not to. Perhaps, without knowing it, somewhere in the miles of his training, or even deep in sleep, winning had become less necessary than self-determination, and sitting in his corner now he discovered that it mattered less that he become champion than that he be himself, and that he was fighting this fight more for what he wanted to feel than what he wanted to make happen. He may have wanted to act in the face of this fierce challenge like the person he thought he was—an honorable, incautious man. Or perhaps it was that in the aching of his often broken, accident-

prone bones, he had come to believe, in some secret, convoluted way, that the dream of victory was unattainable and style was the only choice he had. It seems at times that the desire to transcend their human limits, to be the quickest ever, to take the bigger punch, deliver the greater damage in order to become their other, ideal self, the one born of each boxer's most unique traits as a boxer, is what drives fighters not only to endure but to welcome punishment, to surrender well-being to the wind rather than fail this ideal stranger who they are in those moments of fury, skill, and abandon.

Quarry began the third round with his tactics unaltered, and soon whatever advantage such a change might have granted was no longer possible. Frazier launched a snapping left hook that sliced Quarry's cheek open, and seconds after that they butted heads so violently that his right eye started closing from both top and bottom. He was three rounds past being the blue-hatted young power who'd entered the ring, and, though he didn't know it, and battled on, he was near the end. When the referee declared the bout over before the start of the eighth, he looked grief-stricken. He stood up in his corner, both his punished eyes and arms lifted toward the ceiling in supplication. Suddenly, he hurried across the ring, intending to embrace and congratulate Frazier, wanting to be one of two men who, having battled together, acknowledge the trial they shared. But Frazier was busy. He scarcely noticed. He was yelling at Jimmy Ellis, World Boxing Association champion, who was going to be Frazier's next big payday. Ellis was threatening to climb into the ring while Yank Durham, Joe's aging, overweight manager, pretended to restrain his wild protégé. It was a sham in which Quarry was forgotten as the hype for the next fight commenced.

The following day Howard Cosell taped a TV interview during which he asked Jerry if he'd hurt his hands. Cosell thought he'd noticed a decrease in the number of punches delivered as the fight went on. Jerry was wearing sunglasses. He looked down at his right fist, slack and visibly swollen. There was a long moment of thought before he said that his hand was all right. Shortly thereafter, he knocked out often-beaten British heavy-weight Brian London in what was announced as Quarry's last fight. A few days later he told an interviewer that the knockout punch had broken a knuckle; he admitted to tendinitis in both hands so bad that they ballooned after every fight; he went on to explain in a manner both dutiful and full of regret how he'd done all the damage outside the ring before he was a pro. He was retiring, he said.

And then, in mid-December, he was back. This would happen again and again; he would retire and return. This time he resurfaced at Madison Square Garden, going against Canadian George Chuvalo. Moving toward the final minutes, well ahead on points, his energy level high and his only apparent problem the choice of what to hit Chuvalo with next, he got clipped on the tip of the jaw, stepped back in surprise, and dropped. He might as well have bounced, he was back up so fast. But the referee indicated that he must take the mandatory eight count, meaning that he had to take an eight-second rest before resuming the fight. Guided by some old bit of wisdom from someone whose advice he had no doubt ignored against Frazier, Jerry went quickly to one knee in order to receive maximum benefit from this chance to recover. So there he knelt, his mouthpiece in his hand, breath easy, eyes open and focused until the referee shouted "Ten" and moved to wave his hands. Then Jerry Quarry, who had chosen to fight Frazier in the one manner that guaranteed Frazier's win, leaped in dismay to his feet too late, a loser again, having knelt unhurt for the full count, having failed simply to listen.

Eight months after Jimmy Ellis performed his ringside charade with Durham and Frazier, he thought to actually try his quick hands and slickness against the headlong rush of Frazier, who was beginning to look invincible. Memory carried pictures of Quarry's hard hooking hands banging into Frazier's head with all the effect of feathers. The one-time fat man melted down to his furious essence had begun to occupy that sector of the imagination where menace lurks in a list of names designating those whom it is acceptable, ordinary, even wise to fear, and Frazier topped the list. The smart money counted on him to clarify the muddled heavyweight situation. Since Ali's refusal of induction into the army, Ellis, winner of a tournament in which Frazier had refused to participate, was recognized as champion of forty-four states, while Frazier ruled six.

Once again George Foreman, older now by a few fights, all of them easy, was among the preliminary bouts. However, on this night his orchestrated walk in the park with stiff was about to end. He would be tested. Gregorio Peralta, an Argentinian credited with eighty-five fights at age thirty-five, took Foreman to school and, in the eyes of many, gave him a beating along the way. With a trail of opponents knocked senseless almost at will, Foreman began the contest all pumped up on the drug of arrogant inexperience. Peralta, eager and able, took him into the deep water of ten rounds and showed him just how long they could be. At the end of the ninth, during which Foreman expended everything he owned or could

find, every kind of punch he knew or had heard of, all without harming Peralta, let alone bringing him down, Foreman buckled at the waist. He hung there, broken in half by an exhaustion that looked otherworldly.

Meanwhile, Peralta, older, thinner, a fighter who threw almost all his punches with his left hand, who saluted his opponent, or himself, or the crowd—or sometimes all three—after any round he thought of particular excellence, awaited the start of the last round on his feet, looking no more weary than if the fight had yet to begin. When some five minutes later the decision went to Foreman—5–4, 1–even, 7–3, and 9–1—it was impossible not to see money at work. Peralta stood in the glare of the overhead lights that cared nothing for the waste of his effort. His graceful performance, having wrought what many saw as victory, served best as a reminder that talent guaranteed nothing.

In the main event Ellis kept Frazier off for one round. He stuck with good lefts; he crashed in some straight rights. He tied him up, held, and moved. He employed the tactics that reason had led him, his trainers, and most fans to believe would give him a real chance to win. But by the end of the second round, his plan was pointless. Frazier, on this night, was beyond reason. He burned enough energy in four rounds to carry most fighters a full ten. He was like a windup toy gone berserk, arms pumping, legs never stopping. In a clinch, he pulsed and shuddered as if riding an electrical charge that kept him punching even though he was tied up, his arms all but strapped to his side by Ellis's desperate embrace.

Emptiness is quick to enter a man when the best he can offer is proven useless. Suddenly, Ellis suffered the debilitating certainty that effectiveness was no longer possible for him. The realization danced up to him in the third round and possessed him by the fourth. Frazier yelled when he hit. He talked and grinned, making sure his enjoyment, as he banged Ellis and felt him shudder, was understood. He was out to ransack will, courage, strength, and stamina. Ellis didn't answer the bell for the fifth. Knocked down twice, he later said he had no memory of falling the second time. In his corner, they stuffed ice down his trunks—they slapped and yelled at him, but he couldn't respond. He had been careful, cunning, tactical, and shrewd but he had been destroyed by something crazed and elemental. In the minds of most, Frazier gained an elevated status that night that put him above all other fighters, even Ali. Frazier sprang to his manager with the exuberance of a child bounding to his father as his legs coiled around the older, larger man. He was in every way a human champion; raw power serving the brute ambitions of a man.

Which might be the thought to instigate a sidestep, a head bob, and a dodge to slip and slide back to Liston, who would end his boxing life in Las Vegas and shortly thereafter his actual life in Las Vegas. His last fight of consequence came against Leotis Martin and was staged at the brand new Kirk Kerkorian International Hotel & Casino in December of 1969, not long after Monty Rock III, who was not a boxer but a songwriter-singer-misfit, a rare bird indeed, outlandish to be sure, a strange, ethereal human being, had met his own kind of death in the toxic glow of that same garish Vegas landscape and then emerged in the secondary toxic glow of television on a late-night talk show to speak of what had happened. I viewed both Monty Rock III and Liston's last fight via the airwaves and somehow, inexplicably but inescapably, the nature of this experience along with the shared setting of their calamities turn them into a pair of oddly meshed memories. Very oddly meshed.

If Monty Rock was anything beyond bizarre, it was heart-wrenching. That he was gay went unmentioned given the era. The genial talk-show host welcomed him with an undeniable degree of affection, describing him warmly, as odd, flamboyant, unusual. Strange. His speech pattern, traceable to the Bronx where he was from, had a panicky quality that sprang from what seemed to be his sense of being at all times chased. He spoke mostly of his topsy-turvy career full of starts and stops, ups and downs, giddy successes followed by crashes that could appear self-inflicted. But if they were, he was oblivious to the fact, as he compulsively reported one mishap after the other in a style that presented them not exactly as good news but certainly they were expected. His reconciliation with disaster being innately his due was well established, having been settled early on. Still, it puzzled as well as amused him. Anecdotes gushed out at a breathless rate, as he sprinted to get as far into his story as possible before he had to—and he would have to—put on the brakes with another clause or parenthetical jab of biting self-mockery. I laughed, but at one point or another I came to see his periodic introduction of voluntary self-ridicule as his ploy to beat someone else to the punch, someone far crueller who would take a truly damaging shot at him if they got the chance. He laughed then, kind of panting, and raced on to the next catastrophe that had befallen him, steadily conscious that he dare not go too long without throwing the spotlight on his belittlements once more, another joke at his own expense, another payoff to keep him from something much worse. And for all his motormouth chatter, it had to be noted that the sentence or phrase bearing the barb of his irony was often

shrewd and concise. And as odd as it may seem, and it did to me at the time, there was something about him that reminded me of Liston.

By this point I had discovered an unusual trait in Sonny, which was that he, too, had an epigrammatic gift for irony. Surprised by my first encounter with a quote of this kind from him, I soon found more. I can't pinpoint the source of their resonance, but resonate they did. Certainly my impression of their hard-earned, short and sweet evocations was influenced by my knowledge that Liston had coined them. And while true and of some use as an explanation, that use was only to indicate the beginning of what intrigued me. While wondering about them, I collected them. When he said, "They so mean around here, they steal your sweat," I had to think how mean that really was and by what route that feeling had come to him. In response to one of the many stumbling blocks strewn throughout his life, he said, "Life a funny thing." Any one of a number of encounters could have prompted, "People crazy." Then I read that he said, "I'd rather be a lamppost in Denver than the mayor of Philadelphia." Whatever might have induced him to imagine himself a lamppost in Denver made me laugh, even as his dislike of the City of Brotherly Love revived the bitter wake of the Patterson fight and the stinging wound of rejection that had stayed with him. And, of course, last but not least, the wellspring, the pool that could be tapped for a lifetime supply of pure, everlasting irony: "My old man never gave me anything but a beating."

On the TV screen where Monty Rock III sat on the night in question, peering out into the dark world in which I sat, he told me that he had been murdered in Vegas. They murdered me. Something Sonny would never get to say, though many believed that was what had happened to him. Monty Rock III had been murdered by a band of hostile comedians. That's what he said. Who knows what had happened to Sonny, found dead in his Vegas swimming pool? These cruel comedians had ganged up on him, Monty Rock complained, coming to his show and staring, just staring at him, stone-faced, never laughing. He'd spent a fortune on costumes. And yes, the rumor was true—he'd tried to come on naked, or effectively naked, wearing only a flourish of cloth, as he pranced into the lights to do his routine and sing his song. He'd been coerced into wearing at least a jockstrap, so he did. And then this posse of cynical, hard-hearted, conservative, conformist, vigilante comedians called him names, called him a freak, and labeled his act filth. They bombed him, ruined him. He'd considered himself a star when he left New York for his Vegas engagement, but now he was glancing from his host out to me,

looking out as if I were not merely myself but countless other humans with souls somewhere beyond the camera's lens, as he searched for a sign of us, for our sympathy—somebody had to be out there. The bemused late-night talk-show host was kind and tolerant, while Monty Rock III was near tears, staring out into every tube burning at that hour, and he was begging for help.

Sonny's fight against Leotis Martin was staged in a ring where those enforcer comedians would have been right at home. It was a kind of nightclub setting with tables. The place was Las Vegas and the audience was dressed for a party, New Year's Eve—maybe midnight or 1:00 or 2:00 a.m.—but not the middle of the afternoon. Both preliminaries were freak shows, one of the fighters a pile of blubbery fat. Sonny, entering, was welcomed loudly. Howard Cosell explained to us that Sonny had been adopted by Vegas. He owned a fine, plush home within the city limits. Jack E. Leonard, seated within earshot, ran a loud personal commentary as if the show were his. Two or three rounds into the fight, Sammy Davis Jr. called out, "Get it over with will you, Sonny? I gotta go real soon." The crowd was there to see their boy destroy the visiting Leotis Martin, a workmanlike fighter from Philadelphia whose only national exposure had been in the WBA tournament, where Jimmy Ellis beat him.

So now it was Saturday afternoon and "The Bear," the mythical ex-con who had twice destroyed Floyd Patterson, was going up against a fighter who even the most adventurous imagination saw as capable of little more than mediocrity, and it was happening in the home of all slick victories, with Sonny as the home team. And so when Sonny went down and did not move, people stared in disbelief.

A much younger man and an inferior fighter, Martin did the one thing he could do better and longer than Liston. He ran. He simply made the older man chase him until the older man slowed, weakened. It happened quite suddenly and, up to the moment it began, Sonny fought the fight he wanted, pursuing Martin, hitting him often and hard, knocking him down in the fourth, getting way out front in points, and then the mood shifted. It was vague, almost imperceptible in its first moments. But in the eighth he got hit square in the nose, sending blood into his mouth. He came out for the ninth snorting gore, and the structure of his punches changed, as if weights had been strapped to his arms. A look of worry came into his eyes that no plush house anywhere could ever take away, for he was seeing how he was old and mediocrity might beat him.

His thick body, stony and seemingly impregnable, housed a secret. His arms, slick with sweat, round and monstrous, were subject to this secret. They flailed and fluttered in this last instant.

Martin struck with a jab to the nose that hid the right hand coming behind it. Liston wobbled and Martin stepped in with a sharp hook and another big right, and Sonny fell as Amos Lincoln had fallen; as Patterson had fallen; as Monty Rock III in his own way had fallen.

I know people who, seeing the fight, said things like, “Man, it was sad, so sad—‘The Bear’ looked so sad.” I know one person who told me, “I didn’t want to be left alone with the way I felt.” People from a lot of different kinds of jobs and lives—a college teacher, a student, a press representative, a General Electric administrator—all of whom, I am confident, had they encountered Liston, would have had little to do with him. But “The Bear” was something else, and he had been endowed with certain of their aspirations. It had been hoped that he might be the perfect beast. Untroubled by the impediment of ordinary concerns, his mode simpler than most, “The Bear” was yet a man, and so the feats he performed at forty seemed somehow shareable by all, though at no point in most lives could his deeds ever have been emulated. He was an emissary sent to test certain limits. Seeing him batter some stranger, having months and years go by, and then seeing him perform again with that same undiminished power prompted the feeling that he was immune to time, that he had in fact escaped and that we might also.

The reverberations provoked by these men linger in the mind, echoes that suggest sounds other than the ones they first might have been thought to report, and Jerry Quarry appears as someone seeking, against all reasonable advice, the dignity of self-determination; and from another angle, he is perhaps a man conspiring over and over to give himself defeat. Joe Frazier was awesome, and, though defeat would find him eventually, he was for a time joyously unstoppable. Having never been beaten, the lesson of his experience had taught him that he never would be beaten. He overwhelmed Quarry, an artful, serious man who in retrospect may have made the best choice available by rejecting the tactics that failed Ellis and by fighting in the way that made him proud. But Quarry made that choice too often, retiring and coming back again and again, the last time after a long layoff at the age of forty-seven. By the time he was fifty-three he was dead of dementia pugilistica brought on by the battering he’d taken over the years. He couldn’t feed himself, couldn’t tie his own shoes, was visited by voices. His older brother, James, who’d boxed, but

never professionally, cared for him. His younger brother, Mike, died of the same affliction. There's no quit in a Quarry.

There is perhaps a sense of order and justice in the ability of Gregorio Peralta, the skilled Argentinian, to deal well with George Foreman. Age should add up to something. It should have a sum other than loss. And it does, to a point, it seems, and then the accumulation, the accomplishment, the meaning of the measurement vanishes, and there stands the end. It is the beast in us that dies. Leotis Martin cared nothing for Liston's age or legend. Enduring as long as he had, Charles Liston gained vulnerability, and then he was gone, and he took them all with him: "The World's Baddest Man." "The Bear." And "Sonny." But what about that one? What about "Sonny"? It strikes a different note from the first two. Where had it come from? Some say he picked it up in prison. Others claim that it was given to him by the midwife who birthed him and looking down saw what had arrived.

"Sonny."

The changes in our tissues measure time.