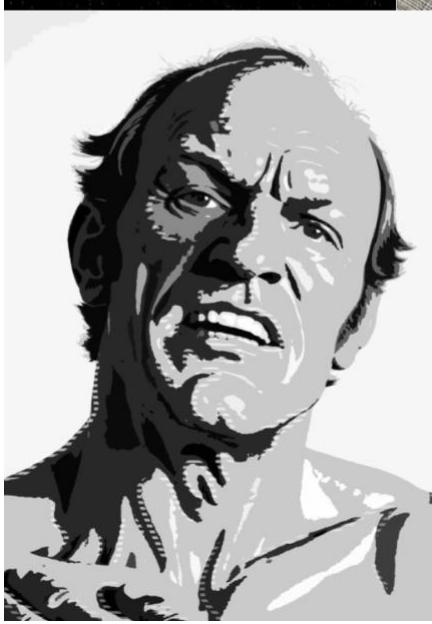
THE SPIT BUCKET

A Boxing Fanzine



Issue #3 – October 2024

With thanks

We would like to thank all our contributors for their generosity in allowing us to publish their wonderful work free of charge, allowing us to produce this zine without cost to the reader. However, if you enjoy what you read and see within then please do check out the links to the writers and artists to find out how you can support them in producing more brilliant work.

If you're feeling extra generous then please consider donating £4 to the excellent Ringside Charitable Trust, who are trying to raise money to build and maintain the UK's first residential care facility for retired boxers. Visit **theringsidecharitabletrust.com** to find out more about their aims and how to set up a regular donation payment. Alternatively, use the QR code below to make a one-off payment.

The Spit Bucket team

Lizzy Turner is a writer and artist living in London. She spent her youth writing poetry instead of exercising, and now credits the lifechanging sport of boxing with being the first form of exercise to get her into a gym willingly. She enjoys interdisciplinary artwork and makes collaborative projects as one half of *You Don't Know*.

Instagram: @lizzy_turner_books

David Turner is a joiner, writer, and sound artist from London. When not obsessively reading books about boxing for his blog www.writersonboxing.com he can be found at an amateur boxing show somewhere in the UK. Outside of boxing he writes horrendously self-obsessed essays about class and mental health. He is the other half of the writing collective *You Don't Know*.

Instagram and X: @writersonboxing

Editor's note

I think most recreational boxers will tell you that from one session to the next your boxing abilities can vary beyond belief. Last Saturday your backhand was able to produce a searing crack on the sweet spot of the medium bag – your hip utterly devoted to the motion of your shoulder – and today your timing has more of the involuntary eyelid spasm about it than the syncopating expertise of a drummer driving a track forward on the snare. By which I mean, it's like you've done no training, ever.

The other week, on David's advice, I started incorporating some basic footwork drills back into my workout. Let me tell you, I didn't ever consider that I might get to the age of 37 and realise that I had never actually understood how to take steps, aka walk, forwards and backwards. You encounter points now and again throughout your training when you realise that something has become second nature. You can do a bit of autopilot and focus on something new or slightly more advanced for a while, but it's important not to forget to revisit the basics frequently, however you may feel that you're advancing. Because when you do, and you look again at breaking something down into the stages of 'what am I doing and how, and why', it can too easily throw you straight back into the feeling of simply not understanding how to do something which 'should' be easy. And unfortunately, it's the only way to show up any bad habits or errors in stance which have set in.

These abrupt blips seem to happen quite often. There I was in the ring, plod-swaying inexplicably with none of the grace I exhibit when dancing, or when walking for that matter, with David attempting once again to describe (very patiently) how human

footsteps work. And like I say, where one skill has slipped, another in the meantime has inadvertently come together. I may suddenly be unable to approach the bag in any way which doesn't resemble a slow waddle, but when I get there I can whip a nasty little left into its body, jerking my right shoulder back in order to pull the punch round with spite – and hopefully hearing "shot" from someone nearby. And where did that come from? I think the main question is, how do you react when these weird little lapses happen, when it seems like nothing will ever come back together again?

[And it's not actually just recreational boxers who suffer this way; see Josh Taylor in his 2022 documentary *Portrait of a Fighter*, repeatedly calling his skipping rope a bastard. Once a perfectionist…]

It's not much different from losing your creative edge, having writer's block, or… Illustrator's Immobilisation. You need to learn to trust that it will come back to you again, otherwise you'll likely start wondering what the point is, and it's far better to just continue doing things than to start wondering about that. I'm sure I'll be able to take footsteps again soon, without thinking much about the physics of it, just as I started writing and drawing again after the most recent long break that I had. I do these things, and keep busy, and my brain and body continue to feel at peace. I can also look over most of the time and see David (and lots of other people) trying to do the same.

Lizzy Turner

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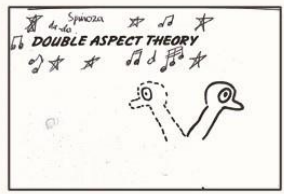


OI UNCLE YOU KNUCKLE

VS

WHERE'S GHOST NUNCLE

TUESDAY. SEPT. 2028

5

A BATBOY PRODUCTION

Box Ghostings #5 by Martin Wakefield (digital image)

Home Show

Danielle Wilde

a consolation of charity / all the sponsors / all the services / all these fucking people there / to watch the vivid reassurance / of our domestication / neutered / all our sharp edges smoothed with leather / glove and gumshield / sedate simulation of our danger / don't matter how hard you can hit / how deep you can dig / you will only ever be hitting another bairn like you / you surrendered weapon / you half-remembered dream / and it's not the revolution you wanted kid / but at least in a ring you can win / fat red dads the shape of bells / clang loudly from plastic chairs / at the back / and we huff and puff / blow our cheap blood down / Jungian symbols / accumulate at red and blue corners / retired coppers / their strangled wives / flank the ring at large round tables / black ties and three course dinners / poachers turned gamekeepers / allowed to enjoy our violence at last / let our flames flicker light up their faces / teeth bared / their fists clench reflexively / involuntarily as we fight / like old snoring dogs / chasing a rat / in their dreams

Sonny Liston's Absent Presence

Andrew Rihn

In a 1968 ad for Braniff Airlines, former heavyweight champion Sonny Liston sits next to Pop Art icon Andy Warhol. Liston wears a simple suit; Warhol, a snappy leather coat. Warhol is speaking about the *inherent beauty of the soup can* in a manner that suggests he won't shut up. By contrast, Liston is stoically silent. He turns his head and gives the camera a deadpan stare. Andy is still droning on as the irony-drenched voice-over cuts in to describe the pair as *talkative* Andy Warhol and *gabby* Sonny Liston before launching into Braniff's slogan: *When you've got it, flaunt it*.

It's an intentionally odd moment, of course. A bit of a condescending joke that makes the viewer complicit in asking *What could Liston possibly have to say about modern art?* There is something compelling in the silence of Sonny Liston: a spokesperson who hasn't any lines to speak.

One of America's greatest intellectuals, the writer James Baldwin, had already identified a silence in Liston back in 1963, when he interviewed the boxer for the skin mag and Playboy-knockoff *Nugget*:

> Liston knows, as only the inarticulately suffering can, just how inarticulate he is. But let me clarify that: I say suffering because it seems to me that he has suffered a great deal. It is in his face, in the silence of that face, and in the curiously distant light in the eyes—a light which rarely signals because there have been so few answering signals. And when I say inarticulate, I really do not mean

> to suggest that he does not know how to talk. He is inarticulate in the way we all are when more has happened to us than we know how to express; and inarticulate in a particularly Negro way—he has a long tale to tell which no one wants to hear.

Mike Tyson, who like Liston would also endure dehumanizing and racist tabloid campaigns, recognized much of himself in Liston's legacy. Before his first fight with Evander Holyfield, Tyson visited Liston's grave in Las Vegas and laid a wreath. *He wasn't treated with any respect*, Tyson said. *White people feared him and black people couldn't understand him. You could never say that he had a fair chance.*

For a sport that applauds fearsome and brutal fighters, Liston was seen as *too* fearsome, *too* brutal. He evoked in what remained of *the fancy* in 1960s America something too haunting, too palpable. President Kennedy, so much a symbol for the optimism of his times, was even against him, reportedly urging then-champion Floyd Patterson to avoid him and find an opponent of *better character*.

Liston was, as one early biographer would have it, the champ nobody wanted.

In Liston, we see what French philosopher Jacques Derrida called the *always-already absent present*. Derrida considered the "absent presence" a kind of specter. An ontological haunting, something both seen and unseen, spoken and silent.

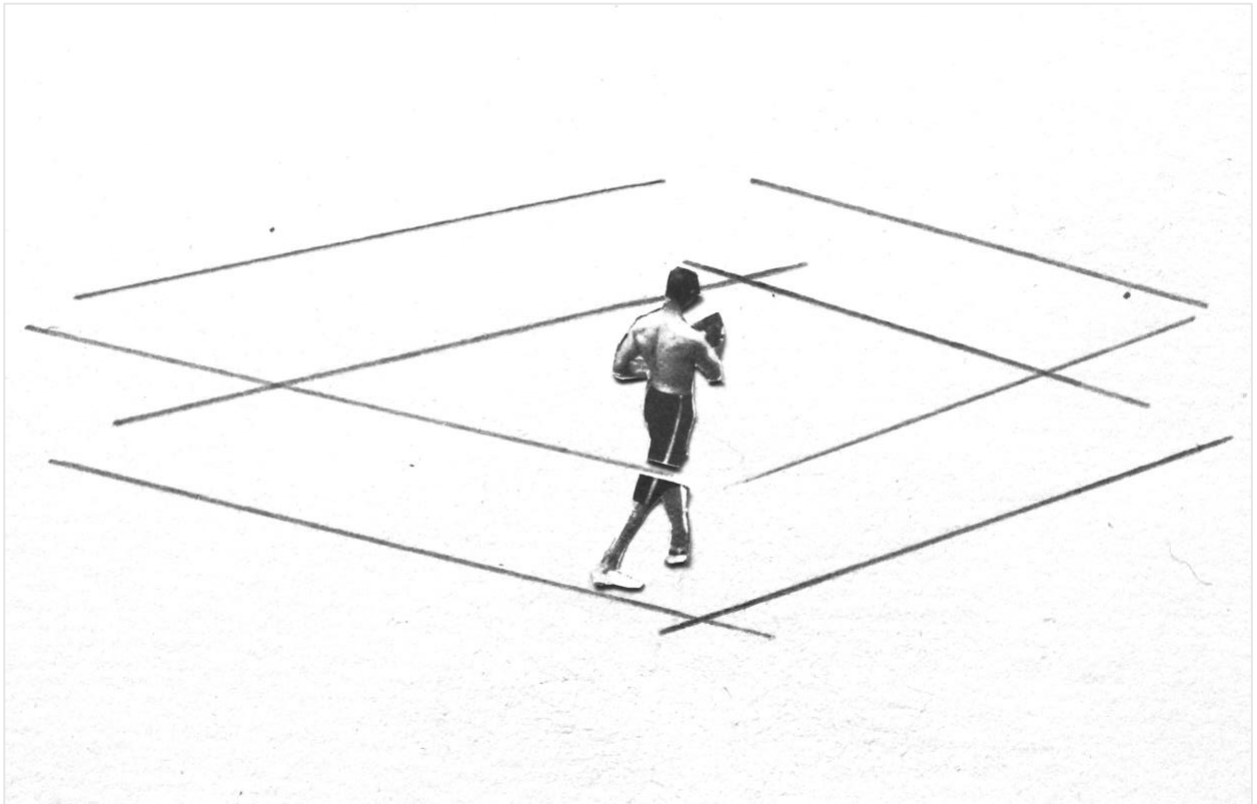
Derrida's *hauntology* has since been picked up by a host of other thinkers and writers. It's been used to describe a grief or nostalgia for what they deem *lost futures*. All these years later,

we could be admiring Liston for his fearless walking down of opponents, or the footwork that gave his combinations such cataclysmic leverage, or the shovel punches that laid low fighters like McMurray, Whitehurst, and Williams. Instead, discussions of Liston tend to orbit around the so-called *phantom punch*, a blow landed by Muhammad Ali during the first round of their 1965 rematch. When a Sonny Liston biopic was finally released in 2008 (with Ving Rhames as Sonny Liston), they even titled it *Phantom Punch*.

One of the heaviest punchers to ever throw leather, and a single punch – not even thrown by Liston – overshadows his entire career.

Sonny Liston died in 1970, although the exact date is unclear. He was found dead from a heroin overdose by his wife, and the coroner could not say for certain when he passed. Liston also did not have a birth certificate, and his official age was always under question. A lost future, an absent presence. His grave reads *Charles "Sonny" Liston 1932 - 1970*, followed by the soulful, uncluttered epitaph, *"A Man."*

Derrida's hauntology is descended from the tragedy of Hamlet, for whom "time is out of joint" – one more way to view Sonny Liston, that uncheered champion, the spokesperson who doesn't speak, the man with a tale to tell which no one wants to hear.



vs by Thomas Darby (mixed-media collage)

X cancels *Y*

David Turner

X tells you, firmly, that your right (back) hand needs to be tight to the side of your cheek 'imagine you have no glove on and you're able to pinch your earlobe between thumb and index finger'. In fact, you're told next time you're on the bags you should just remove your right glove entirely. Practice throwing jabs only, ear gripped as if you're leading yourself to the head teacher's office. Better still! imagine you're holding a phone up to the side of your head, the line is bad, and any movement means missing parts of an important conversation. (As if you don't already have enough to visualise.)

And it happens again – as *X*'s voice is drowned by your own thoughts – your mind fills with pointless questions. Questions like: 'do they use this phone metaphor with the youth boxers?', a whole generation that will never hold a phone against their heads. A generation much more likely to stride toward you in the street talking into the *butt* of their phone, the device held out in an upturned hand like a Mayfair-socialite contemplating a rye cracker.

X: 'ok, so for this round, keep the back hand tight in position, throwing jabs only until I say otherwise' punctuated by a look that burns *this is all very basic stuff,* simultaneously, into your forehead and into the part of your gut that deals exclusively with embarrassment.

While not an exact science your body clock has synced closely enough with the never-ending gym timer that you know the end of your one-minute rest is racing toward you. Once again you

decide there isn't enough time to explain to *X* that the confused defensive position of your rear hand is neither wilfully disobedient, nor a complete lack of physical coordination.

It's a nervous questioning set in place by *Y* (coach of the group classes held by that charity you want to support). Being, justifiably, proud of his pro career *Y* regularly emphasises how his intention is that you all punch in a manner that means 'when you hit them, they stay hit!' No *up on your toes*, no extra unnecessary movements. Just planted feet, low rolling shoulders and exploding into <u>everything</u>. Right hand slid down your jawline covering almost half the mouth, back knuckles facing the opponent (think stifling a yawn in a meeting, elbow on the desk), all this encouraging a full rotation of the shoulder, forearm, wrist, fist, and knuckles when striking. Snapping into position upon impact. 'Bang!'

Back hand all coiled kinetic, attacking, potential. More deliberate obstruction to their jab than passive yet reactive defensive tool. *Y* isn't unique in his insistence that every student, regardless of size, weight, body shape or personality should adopt the singular style that he found most comfortable or had insisted upon him in his late teens. A style that will always show him in the best light. (Do what I do. (It feels right to me.))

And while there isn't enough time to bring all of this up in your one-minute rest, this is only one of several queries brought to mind when contemplating the contradictory advice you've received about where best to place a non-striking hand.

Question: when in boxing history did the 'open' back hand (palm turned out slightly toward the opponent) begin to phase out? Back hand as swat, as bat, as catcher's mitt. Ready to intercept

and knock punches from their trajectory. At home I have rows of books full of pictures of boxers looking out at the viewer with the inside of the wrist below their rear hand completely exposed to the lens.

Question: did this hand position fall out of fashion because of newer, more innovative defensive techniques? Or did *punchers* figuratively expose flaws behind it, and more precisely the vulnerable areas of exposed jaw and temple?

Question: how many clichéd, cigar-biting, side-mouth-talking old guard coaches continued to insist to gyms full of young men that they should be respecting what came before? About how nobody respects the *art* of boxing anymore. That all anyone thinks of is the whorey spectacle of the knockout. Constantly marauding forward while neglecting to learn to box moving backwards, anticipating and setting traps; 'Willie Pep once won a round without throwing a punch'... 'yeah, okay grandad'.

One minute is never enough time to get these questions out. Desperate for air. Desperate for the strength to pick up these ever-heavier hands of yours – right tight to the cheek and left piston-ing out, searching for that satisfying *crack* on the pads.

Sketch by Amelia Morris (ink drawing)

On the Ropes

Phil Ginsburg

Sonny Liston's right hand boxing glove escaped from a storage bin in Philadelphia and immediately began doing damage

Its first victim was a licentious podiatrist with a questionable medical license who would often play footsie with his patients – big toe fetish stuff

One jab to the forehead was enough of a punchline to end this joker's pussyfooting around with people's soles

Sonny's glove remembered his third round knockout of Cleveland Williams back in the day and quietly quipped to an onlooking nail nipper

"I still got it."

Sonny's glove next took a swing at an intellectual elitists' book club gathering

Sonny wasn't much of a reader but he understood things in life books don't teach

So during the discussion of Ayn Rand's 'Atlas Shrugged'

Sonny's glove took offense at how Rand tended to denigrate emotions and create unrealistic expectations on the consistency of rational human behaviour

After all, Liston said of his father, "The only thing that he gave me

was a beating."

It took Sonny's glove less time than it took his first round knockout of Floyd Patterson to scramble the brains of these eight lightweight eggheads with a down to earth jab of reality

Keeping with literary setting, Sonny's glove couldn't resist describing the scene with an onomatopoeia:
"That jab felt like thunder."

Finally, Sonny's glove took one last swing at those who offered ugly speculations on how Sonny died:

A heroin overdose?

Murdered by the Mafia for not throwing the Wepner match?

Sonny Liston's right hand glove decided it wasn't worth the fight to counter punch these below the belt jabs at its favourite fighter's character, and returned to be with its left laced mate at the storage bin

In the end, both gloves were thankful for the privilege of holding the hands of the man who once said: "In a world of fighters, be a knockout."

It's not Shakespeare, but Shakespeare too was a fighter among his ring of writing competition

And most people agree in a ten round bout with Christopher Marlowe, Marlowe would have fallen in four.

Clash by Lizzy Turner (ink 'klecksograph')

When Art and Boxing Almost Collided

Eric Palmer

In a 2023 article entitled 'Blood or Flowers: Boxing in the Visual Arts', written for an online Belgian magazine with the strapline "High Road to Culture in Flanders and the Netherlands", writer Jan Van den Berghe wrote:

> Jan Hoet considered boxing a greatly underestimated artistic activity. "*Just like art, boxing is all about the sense of space, rhythm, character, concentration, and reflexes. A champion fighter has to see through their opponent quickly, anticipating their movements. The same qualities come in handy for a museum curator. In art you have to be able to accurately discern between authenticity and posturing; to feel where authenticity ends, and calculation begins; to know whether art is of primary or only secondary importance to someone. Psychology and intuition play a major role in art, just as it does in boxing*."

I didn't have a clue who Jan Hoet is or was. The following short explanation is from an article in 'LAMBIEK' Comiclopedia, from a Dutch comic book store and art gallery in Amsterdam:

> Jan Hoet was a Belgian art curator and Museum Director, who gained a legendary status in his home country. In 1975 he established a museum for contemporary art in Ghent. In 1999 he renamed it the Stedelijk Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst (City Museum for Contemporary Art), and on the opening day, he organized a boxing competition. Hoet had experience as an amateur boxer and decided to challenge the artist Dennis Bellone to a

fight. Real-life Belgian heavyweight boxer Freddy de Kerpel acted as referee.

So, that sets the scene: In Belgium, boxing and art are both art. You may be thinking "what a load of bollocks," because if you've got this far, you'll also be thinking where, if anywhere, is this going? The 'Blood or Flowers' article bangs on for quite a bit in a very 'arty' way, but has respectable pictorial examples of boxing painted on canvas, and there we have the potential for a witty pun missed by the article's author, who could have remarked that boxing and art both rely on canvas to work; one splattered with sweat and blood, the other daubed and splattered with paint! But he didn't, so we will move on and resist the temptation to read another article from the same magazine, this time entitled 'From Avant-Garde to Beau Monde. The Paintings of Kees van Dongen'.

Instead, we bring in the hero of this piece: my father-in-law, William Dean Bradley, known in his circles as "Deano". He was also my daughter Lizzy Turner's grandfather. He was Canadian, and an artist. On one occasion, when I told a colleague he was an artist, it evoked the response, "Piss, Paint, Pavement or Con?" Well, within the genre Paint he would have identified more specifically as Abstract. If you look up 'abstract' in a thesaurus it will list quite a number of alternative words; non-concrete, intellectual, immaterial, intangible, non-figurative, non-representational and so on. Strangely, it does not list "squiggly lines, splodges and splatters in different colours on canvas."

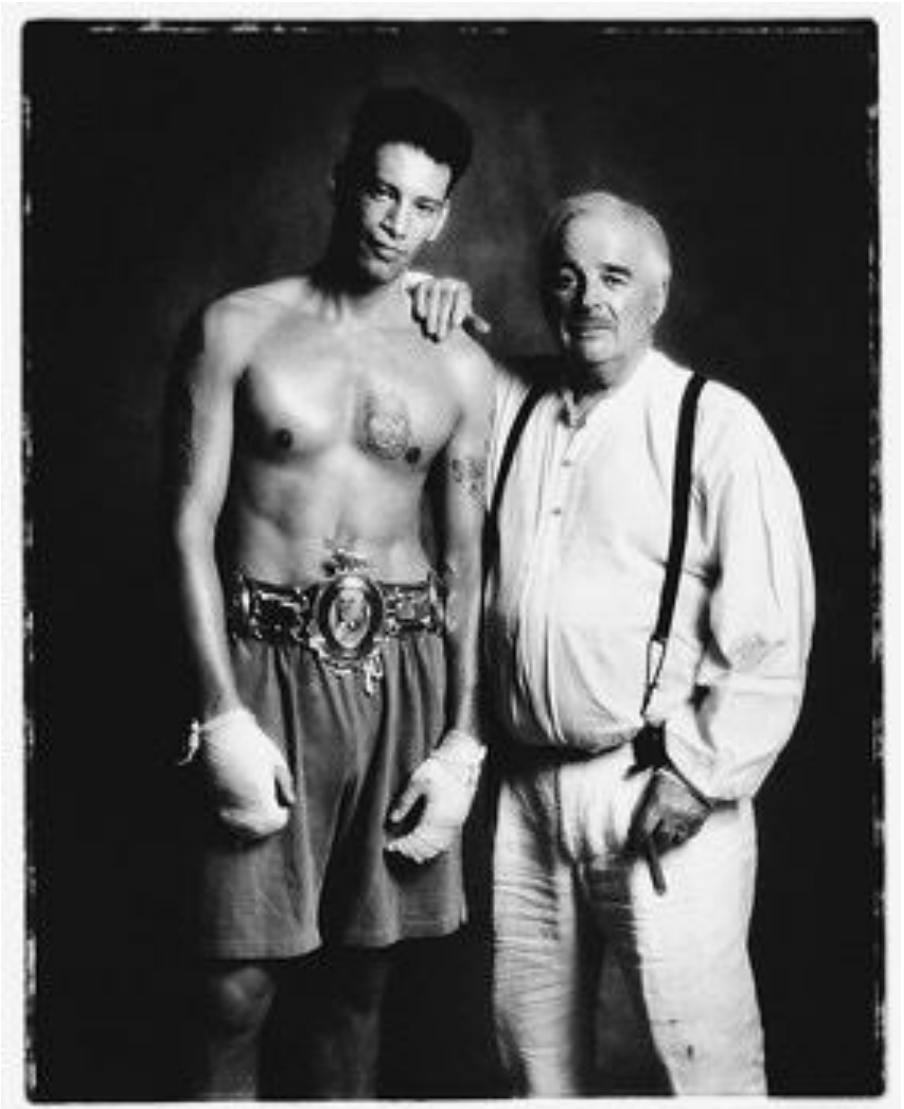
Nevertheless, he was quite well known in the art world of the 70s and 80s, and the socialising cognoscenti world of London's Soho and Leicester Square. In his later years Deano would entertain social groups with excerpts from his library of anecdotes and other encounters with the rich, the famous and stars of film and

television; often experiences at Ronnie Scott's, or from drinking in The French House or Le Beaujolais. Mention of anyone remotely famous would invariably elicit the response, "Oh Jeez, he was a terrific artist," or, "Oh Jeez, he was a terrific musician." But never to my knowledge, "Oh Jeez, he was a terrific boxer."

However, one of Dean's closest friends is photographer Bruce Fleming, who is probably most well-known for his series of photographs of Jimi Hendrix, as well as other music legends of the late 60s and 70s. Within Bruce's extensive portfolio of photographs you may occasionally come across a sepia portrait of a boxer and his manager. The boxer is a big, fit lad in boxing shorts, his hands bandaged, and a championship belt adorning his waist. The manager is moustachioed, quite a bit less fit in a collarless shirt, braces holding his trousers up against his pot-belly, and a cigar in his hand. The manager is Deano!

The initial incredulity in the family soon subsided when Lizzy showed the portrait to some boxing-savvy friends; the 'boxer's' wraps are not tied correctly, and his posture is somewhat downbeat, not that of a championship boxer. It seems, therefore, that Deano's experience in the world of boxing was all smoke and mirrors. Especially since Bruce Fleming has recently explained that the portrait was taken for an advert for a sporting goods company, which never saw the light of day. The boxer was a male model. That's as close as Deano got to the other sort of canvas!

So, as the Belgians believe, boxing can be and often is art. But I can't think of one example where art is boxing – except of course if a disgruntled contestant plants one on the chin of a judge in 'Portrait Artist of the Year'...



Photograph by Bruce Fleming

I thought I knew grief until I retired from the sport I love

Ella Gilbert

I was in the car park of Islington Boxing Club when I got the call to say my mum had died.

The world changed in a heartbeat. I felt like the ground had given way beneath me – all the facts I thought I knew about my life were shifting sand beneath my feet. I wasn't prepared to be thrust so suddenly into loss.

Grief turned my life upside-down and shook it until all the loose bits fell away. But one thing that remained was that big red building in Elthorne Park full of punchbags, players and strange oaths. Somehow, inexplicably, I've been boxing for well over a decade. It's always been the thing I turn to in times of crisis: it's the anchor in the storm that has held me fast through thick and thin.

Boxing was my relief during the tumultuous years of my early twenties, when I was struggling through eating disorder recovery and trying to reframe my relationship with my body. It saw me through break-ups, house moves and a very public trial for political protest. Boxing was my solace throughout my PhD, giving me time, space and a reason to get out of my head. I boxed my way through the pandemic. And the boxing club was there when my mum died.

For me, grief felt like a distance from other people. In the grips of my eating disorder I sought the numb detachment of hunger as a way *not* to feel. But grief felt like a constant blanket of sadness that cut me off from other people. Grief made me feel like I was the only person in the world feeling that way.

But Islington Boxing Club was where I could go to feel almost human again. To reconnect with my body and feel my chest heaving and my heart beating and remember that I am still here. Life must go on. I am not dead yet.

I couldn't help but feel alive amongst the chaos of the boxing gym on a training night. The vicious whoosh of skipping ropes slicing through the air, the insistent staccato of gloved fists hitting the coaches' pads, the piercing wail of the round timer carving out time.

This is where champions are made: in spit-and-sawdust gyms like this, *proper* boxing clubs. The air, pregnant with sweat and determination, is intoxicating.

Boxers share a struggle, a drive to make something better of ourselves. Everyone has a story just like mine, a pain just like mine, a reason just like mine to push themselves through discomfort. And the people are what makes this place so special.

It's not about violence, or success, or even graft: it's about community. The club is my second home, a place where I feel safe and loved and valued. My dysfunctional extra family that will back me to the end.

So I'm not overexaggerating when I say that retirement was the biggest loss of my life.

I was not just saying goodbye to a sport, I was saying goodbye to a part of myself. I lost a part of me that was strong and capable. I lost the means to cope with some of my darkest moments. And just when I needed it the most, boxing was the one thing I couldn't turn to to cope with this loss. Because this time, the loss *was* boxing. And it felt like it was being torn out of me. I didn't know who I was without boxing.

I retreated from the gym to chrysalise and ride out my grief. It was in that soft quiet darkness that I realised that boxing will never *not* be a part of me: it's part of my history and part of my future. And one thing that boxing has taught me above all else is resilience.

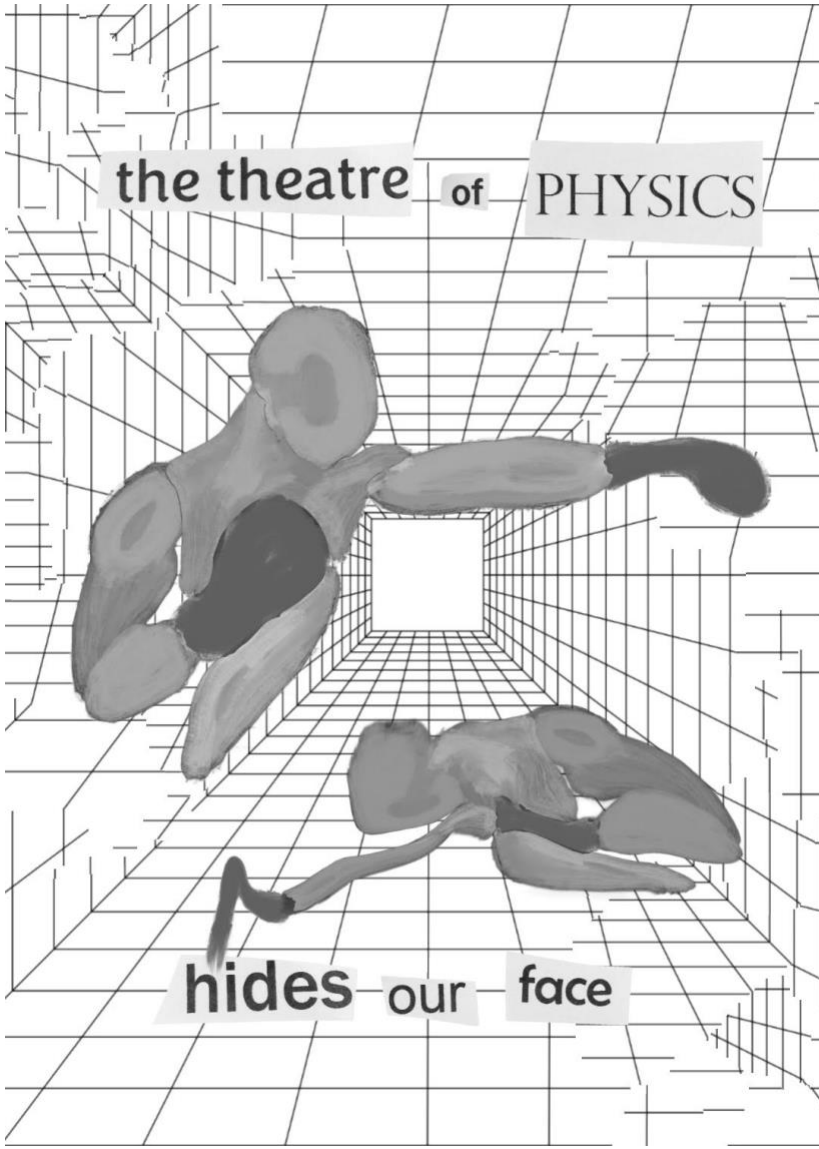
In competitive boxing, everything hinges on the outcome of three 3-minute rounds. And every time you step through those ropes you have to believe wholeheartedly that you will win. If you don't? You've already lost.

And so every time I lost, despite all that self-belief, it crushed me. I had to confront the brutal reality of failure, which is so much bigger than the result of a bout.

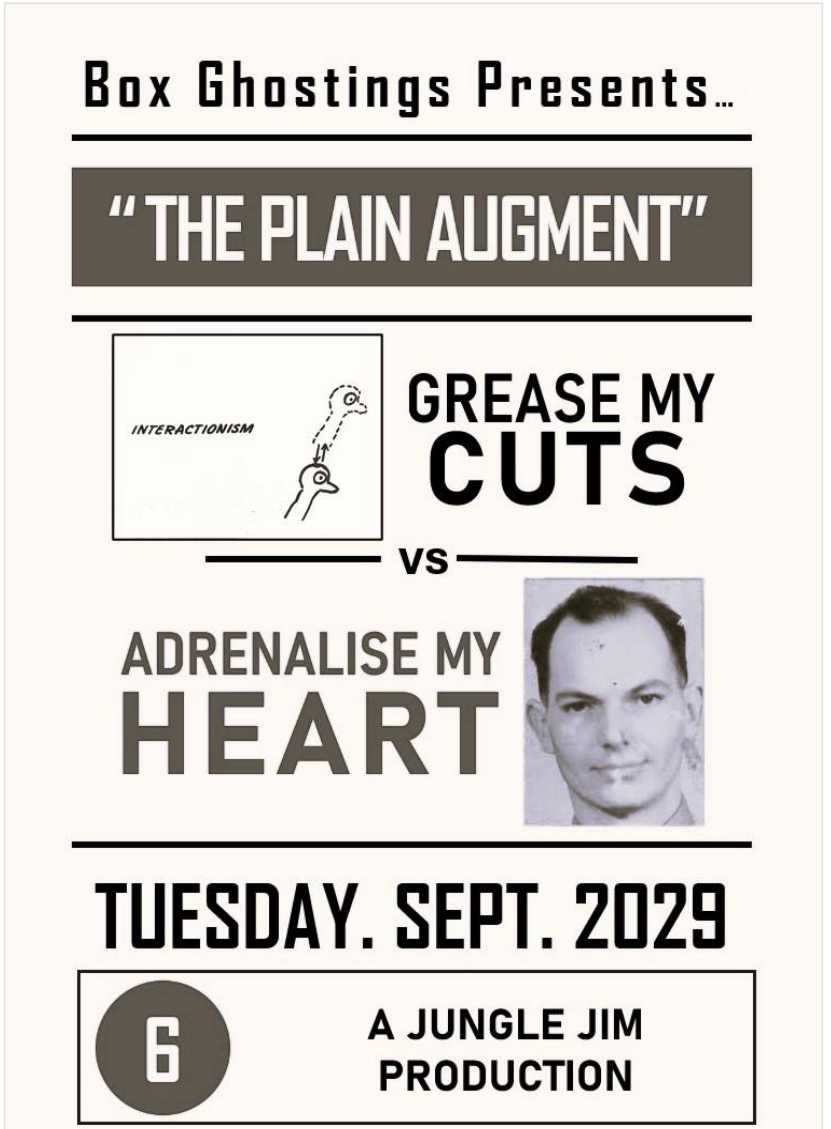
But I kept coming back after every setback. Call it foolish, call it pig-headed, call it what you want, but every time I overcame a loss I came back - not stronger - but more determined. This sport has taught me more about failure and coming back from defeat than anything else.

And so when I emerged on the other side of my metamorphosis, crumpled, dusty and blinking in the light, it was coach Ells Bells who unfurled her wings and shook herself off. A determined, transformed lepidopteran.

So yeah, it's coach Ells Bells from now on.



The Theatre of Physics by James Knight (mixed-media visual poem)



Box Ghostings #6 by Martin Wakefield (digital image)

Style and Boxing

Aamir Mehar

I always get the impression that, for a lot of people, most of what makes boxing exciting are the power punches and the knockouts. I'm not immune to the appeal in this; there is something thrilling about seeing perfect, hard punches, and fighters dropping to the canvas from such attacks. Honestly, though, what excites and impresses me far more is graceful evasiveness, nimble footwork, and a slick stylishness in general. This is where I see beauty in boxing.

The dip to the side to 'slip' incoming attacks, letting them fly just over your left or right shoulder, before you pivot away or counter. The sharpness of the pivot itself, the acceleration and sudden halt as you land in place. The way one can bounce back against the ropes of the ring, causing them to bend and squeak, in order to get away from an attacker. The dance to escape the corners and the dance to force someone into them. I'm reminded, in regard to the latter, of Norman Mailer calling the classic technique of cutting off the ring "a balletic art" in the documentary *When We Were Kings*, where we are shown footage of George Foreman practising for his fight against Muhammad Ali, shuffling side to side, anticipating where his sparring partner will escape and then stopping them.

For grace in boxing, Floyd Mayweather Jr's famous 'check hook' against Ricky Hatton is particularly wonderful to watch in action; he catches Hatton coming in with a left hook to stop Hatton's own lunging left, and delicately skips to the side at the exact same time. Hatton crashes past him like an out of control train,

ramming against the corner post, and then falls down to the canvas, dazed.

There is a touch of grace even to getting in and out of a ring; you slip one leg through the ropes first, and then you dip down between them, the other leg following, always mindful to avoid getting your shoe caught. For some boxers, that touch of grace isn't enough, and they want more ostentatiousness; 'Prince' Naseem Hamed did dazzling front flips over the ropes, and Chris Eubank Sr vaulted over them as if casually hopping over a low railing on the way to a bus.

I don't actually fight – I don't have the inclination or the toughness – but I do like to step into the ring and dance around in it by myself, shadowboxing. Jabs, straights, hooks, a couple of uppercuts. Slipping, weaving, hands up around my temples, then down to my jaw, then in a cross-guard position and back to the temples again, my back to the ropes as I bounce lightly against them and then spring away. Sometimes I get ahead of myself as I try to gracefully dart across the ring, like when I recently attempted to bounce off the ropes into a straight right hand and ended up tripping. (I tried to at least avoid an unsightly fall by rolling slightly when I hit the canvas, but it didn't really work. Other people kindly asked if I was alright rather than laughing at my silliness.)

I can't help trying to do such things, though, such is my admiration for graceful fighters. I'm impressed if I see a fighter block a combination of punches, but I'm delighted when I see them *evade* them, ducking, slipping, dancing away. On the way back from the gym I find myself passing under a willow tree with long leaves, and I slip and weave under them to avoid the leaves catching my head. There's no real practical point in the emphasis

I place on head movement in my training; why would I need to move my head if I don't actually spar or fight? Why do I keep my other hand high when I hook, as if to block an incoming attack? Why practice feinting? I don't think I'd find my practice anywhere near as enjoyable without doing each of those things, though.

Winning in a match is ultimately about hitting your opponent; you obviously can't win a bout on evasion alone, even though defence is indeed one of the categories judges use to score rounds. I've been overly evasive myself, writing this, so I'll come forward now. Hitting others, and taking hits, are not pleasant experiences for me. Even if I could get used to it, knowing the dangers of accumulated brain damage from hits to the head, and the anxiety such a thing generates for me, would always hold me back. I can get over being temporarily hurt, but to know that I would carry incurable damage is another story. But the beautiful aspects in boxing – the movement, the timing, the stylishness – keep me from ever seeing it as simply a violent affair. It's dance intertwined with pain. I fear it and I love it.

The Lion of Highgate Hill

David Kotok

The sun spills over the Isle of Grain. Rage red, a patina to the fighters. They circle and roll their wrists, a fist high to protect, the other posing a threat; eye-on-eye and tense to a twitch that springs the arm or a corkscrew punch. Pacing and weaving to strike or duck, press an advantage or deflect, and guided by the ropes. The Slasher wheezes, sweat stinging in cuts, cracked ribs needling, blood frothing in his ear. He wobbles under a thump to the temple, but a left swipe holds him up. The crowd are muted by the challenger's pugilist skill, the cruel precision of jab and hook.

Much the smaller man, he's thin but hard-toned, dancing a jig so light-foot he might have wings in his boots. He fair hangs in the air, beyond the Champion's reach, and slips inside with a blow to the chin, pasting brow and nose in a flurry. A gash splits on the cheek, splattering down the heavy chest.

The predator prowls, delaying the kill, teasing the prey, playing with the audience. A large dog by the apron barks and the fighter pounces, knuckles stabbing, diligently widening wounds. The Slasher flays wild but the target is less than a blur, and he falls to his knees as the referee signals an end.

The victor removes his waist scarf and drapes it over the loser's bowed head, pats his shoulder. Assistants jump to press steel on cuts and oil on bruising. A wide and heavy belt is fastened loosely about the new Champion's midriff. He opens his arms to the darkening sky as throats open to laud the Brighton Bomber, King of the Ring.

“Lion,” he beckons.

The dog howls at the risen moon.

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I never saw him fight again, but that night’s theatre is how I wait for sleep, hands between my legs, wondering about the touch of tight skin and muscle, hard as bone. So, when news of his death reached Kent, I was compelled to journey from Grain to feed the memory. I left my wife, and the child I wasn’t sure was mine, to join the funeral march from Heath to Hill.

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The crowd ferments around the cortege, a churn, dancing and weeping and throwing dead flowers. Men in skirts spin the dervish and clowns bounce over our heads. Acrobats tumble from trees and jugglers throw flaming bottles at walls. Glass shards sparkle emeralds on cobbles. Musicians play demented fiddles. Drummers beat devilish tattoos and angels blow horns at the clouds. Painted wagons drawn by steers sell liquor and pies, which I gulp down as the horde surges up the Hill, swaying and pissing and puking sour ale and home-made gin. I sway to a toga-clad choir chanting hymns of loss and joy, and goad thuggees daubed in woad and waving spears. The bulbous belly of Bacchus, black as fermented berries, shines under my oiled hands and Javan Banshees hug me to their wet chests. Fights erupt out amongst drunks and fetishists, and pugilists who loudly swear they’d have whipped the Bomber for Belt and Crown.

The procession presses through the mayhem, the cadaver in a cotton shroud, a top hat wobbling on the chest. The bindings billow as the wheels bounce, and I fancy the cocoon will rip and the deceased emerge, a radiant nightbird rising to swallow the stars. Behind the hearse, alone and sedate in grief, Lion ignores the bedlam fuelled by men, all for the love of his master's failed heart.

At the Cemetery the melee scales railings and stampedes through graves, cracking open catacombs and felling statues. A brigade of rozzers pushes the mob back, allowing funeral carriages and family passage. Directed by a priest with an umbrella, six bare-chested men in silk breeches, hands bound in leather cushions, clumsily lower the body through their muffled hands into the earth. Music and song fade down the Hill and all chatter stills, just as the Bomber silenced the Isle of Grain not so many years ago.

The priest mumbles and the tomb is sealed. I wipe a tear as Lion curls on the burial mound, lays his mighty head on his paws and turns to stone.

Author's note: this story is a tribute to Tom Sayers, a Victorian bare-knuckle fighter often thought of as the first heavyweight champion, despite being of small stature compared to his many opponents. His last fight was against an American challenger, John C. Heenan, on 17th April 1860, ending in a draw after Heenen throttled Sayers on the ropes and the crowd invaded the ring. Although the two men settled their differences, Sayers never fought again.

Sayers died aged 39 on 8th November 1865, and the funeral was attended by thousands of well-wishers. However, it caused as much outrage and consternation as his illustrious, if illegal, fighting career. According to *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, the burial took place amid scenes of "irredeemable blackguardism, brutal levity, and barbaric ferocity".

I recently travelled to Highgate Cemetery to pay respects at Sayers' grave, famously guarded by a statue of his faithful mastiff, Lion.

Contributors

Thomas Darby is an artist and writer currently hunkered in the National Forest.

Nathan D'Arcy is an illustrator from East Yorkshire, living in London.

Bruce Fleming is a UK-based award-winning commercial and fine art photographer. Instagram: @bruceflemingphotography Website: www.brucefleming.com

Ella Gilbert is a competitive amateur boxing coach and former boxer for Islington Boxing Club. She's currently writing a book about her life in boxing.

Phil Ginsberg is a performance/poet and playwright. His poetry book *In Pursuit of the Almost* is found at www.endeavorliterary.com/ginsburg

James Knight is a poet, artist and performer based in the UK. Twitter/X: @badbadpoet Website: thebirdking.com Instagram: @jkbirdking

David Kotok has had 9 tales published in magazines and anthologies. Between writing he creates ceramic art, walks the dog and feeds the crows.

Aamir Mehar is a freelance writer based in London. You can find him @aamirmwriter on Twitter/X, and you can read his boxing blog at www.aquietringwalk.wordpress.com

Amelia Morris is a mixed media artist based in the West Midlands, exploring the dynamic interplay of movement and stillness in her works.

Eric Palmer is Lizzy's dad. He's quite old and spent a long time in the Navy. He doesn't remember ever throwing a punch or being in a boxing ring, but he does know that a boxing ring uses rope and canvas, just like some of the ships he's been on.

Andrew Rihn is the author of *Revelation: An Apocalypse in Fifty-Eight Fights* (Press 53, 2020). A frequent contributor to *The Fight City* and other boxing sites, Andrew lives in Massachusetts, USA.

Martin Wakefield is no longer a poet from London.

Danielle Wilde is a poet, writer, boxer and England Boxing coach from Yorkshire. Her words have appeared in Vogue, Dazed, Stylist and the fevered dreamscapes of tracksuit nihilists across the North of England.

Submissions

If you would like to be considered for publication in **issue 4** of *The Spit Bucket* then send us any work that follows the guidelines listed below **before 15 November 2024**, along with a 25-word contributor's bio to: **thespitbucketzine@gmail.com**

Please send all submissions as separate documents, not within the body of an email, this helps us to maintain your preferred formatting.

We welcome the weird, odd and strange, so share with us your most mischievous interpretations on the theme ***BOXING***.

We are unable to offer any contribution fees. This zine will remain free to readers to make it as accessible as possible, with readers asked to consider donating to *Ringside Charitable Trust* as they bid to open the UK's first residential care home for ex-boxers.

Guidelines

- **Visual art –** Think collage, illustrations, photos of sculpture, line drawings. All work to be formatted as A5-portrait (preferably) and in black and white only. Please send as a jpeg file.
- **Prose –** Up to 900 words. If you have an idea for a longer piece of writing, then please email us first with a proposal for us to consider.
- **Poetry –** Up to 26 lines: We are particularly interested in poetry that experiments and pushes visual boundaries.
- We would prefer all submissions to be previously unpublished, though you may want to share work with us from an upcoming book and that, of course, is fine.