

THE NATURAL



By Tim Parker

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T 2003

Bristling and bleeding from one ear, Juan moves towards me again. The third round's bell has rung, and though amateur bouts have five, this one is in its settling stages. My opponent is flustered and outmatched, giving the last of what he brought. It is a place we've been together many times, Juan and I—our coach Pasha's star students, we sit atop the meager food chain of this tiny mill town's gym. We train and spar together, run road together, and when the gym can sell a few tickets to the locals, we compete in exhibition bouts like today's.

Though our matches are unofficial and only casually judged, Juan has never beaten me in this ring. And if you could see this moment through my eyes you would see that this small victory, to me, is as great and grave as any. It is my Golden Gloves, my Rumble in the Jungle; I am Marvin and Muhammad and Mike. I have no other way of measuring how much man I am, so I am measured within the twenty feet of canvas between these ropes, three minutes at a time. Closing out the two rounds beyond me is a task I go to gladly.

There is no history in the ring. Nothing is explained. It is you, and him, and the gloves: 12 ounces of grace given to jaw and joint

alike.

More ballet than brawl, boxing—‘the sweet science’—is a dialogue of blows. The nettling tap of a jab, the cross’s piston pulse, and the hook’s looping swivel are its syllables. Strung together, these syllables form sentences, statements creatively delivered to cause and exploit openings. But these statements are not delivered to the ear. They are delivered to the will.

It is rare that one punch, by itself, will hurt a trained boxer. There are exceptions—if you can land a blow, for instance, below the back’s broad slab of muscle and behind the ribs, you can bring a man to his knees and make him piss Guinness. Usually though, it will be the collective debit that many blows make from the will that bankrupts it. Shatter your opponent’s will, and you are alone again, punching a bag in an empty gym like so many times before. It cannot hit back in any way that matters. It swings on its chain and suffers.

Juan moves in again, using his body to borrow the angles that I would need to escape the flurry of his punches. A southpaw, he knows that given any chance I will rotate to his right, outside the reach of his rear hand’s cross, and too near inside the range of his front hand’s hook, silencing both. But I have no need for escape routes. My rear hand disdains his jab, telegraphed to me by his shoulder—his fists turn sideways as soon as they move, so the arms curve wide as one would give a hug, instead of forward from the shoulder and straight down, as one would swing a hammer. Their energy sinks into my shoulder and they glance away.

I retort with jabs of my own, answers that are far less benign. The moment my front fist leaves my brow and the moment it finds his are overlapping moments. Every needless part of the motion has been melted away by a million sweat-drenched repetitions. My glove pivots at the last second before impact, as slight as the half-turn of a screw. It's this part of the jab that flays skin and draws blood. Hooks and crosses will forever fill highlight reels, but jabs are the bricks you use to build a beating. Great speeches are made out of great syllables.

It is the autumn of 2003, and my jab is my prized possession. It is as swift and stiff and severe as the cold snap that will sniff around these parts in just a few weeks' time.

Again and again, Juan resets and reapproaches. Again and again, his tempo is obscured into mine. A dull blade scraped upon a sharp one, a whisper borne up by a bellow, a pebble swept into a stream. 30 seconds remain on the cheap digital board we use to time rounds when he stumbles and lurches towards me, and we clinch together. With his chest against mine, his heaving breaths breach against me more forcefully than any of his blows.

We break as the bell sounds. As I leave the clinch I keep my elbow wrapped inside of his and pull, subtly tweaking the elbow joint and tricep, pain he will feel when he raises his gloves at the beginning of the next round. *As if you needed to do that*, I wish I could tell myself, looking back. *You prick*.

He is my best friend, and the better man by far—a father, a soldier, and the hardest worker I have ever met. But the equation

inside this ring is uneven. I am at home here: a child, joyfully playing with the only gift he has ever been given.

The bell sounds again, closing the round.

“Oh my God! You’re actually sweating!” Pasha says, sauntering across the ring with a wild grin and pointing at my cheek.

Adjusting the wraps on my hands, I glance over and nod towards Juan, bowed over and panting on the corner of the mat.

“It’s his.”



T I

2002

I write this—a reflection on two things I've been doing, for the most part poorly, for a very long time now—in a moment of tranquility not often found in either. The room is still, and quiet, and lit mostly by the eight wide monitors that hunch over me like ringside medics, attending to me as if I'm laying with my back on the mat. “He got you good,” they seem to say. “You're okay.”

But I've never been on my back in a boxing ring. I've never been knocked out or stunned. And to thank for that I have not work ethic, or grit or gumption, but the reckless fortune of origin. Some ingredient written into my recipe; a ballast laid at the base of me when I was built.

As I think on it, it is hard to imagine anything more *wholly* fulfilling than doing something at which you are truly a Natural. Many years ago, boxing was that something for me.

Now I go to work each day at something that is, and will always be, profoundly unnatural to me. The endless ordering of stimuli into sense. The struggle to fend off boredom while shunning thrill. To keep the monotony endurable and the mind quiet.

Each morning I go to war, and the armor of rigor and routine is all that keeps me alive. Armed with spreadsheets and overwrought plots of price and time, buoyed by experience and curiosity, I press buttons until a paycheck comes out. Sometimes, I keep pressing buttons and the paycheck goes right back in. Sometimes nothing happens at all, and I wonder what exactly it is that I do for a living.

I think to myself: *Someone somewhere sewed a field with seeds today. Someone splinted a bone. What is it that I have done?*

Most days, after the dust settles, I'm not entirely certain whether I'm a bold and brilliant speculator, or a lunatic, spinning the wheel of Fortune with a depraved smile and believing he has won simply because the wheel is still spinning.

The Natural doesn't concern himself with any of this. He goes to war wearing only paint and a loincloth and is unlucky if he gets a few scrapes. He doesn't tug too hard on the ribbon that ties him to eternity. He doesn't need to. For him, there is only what needs to be done, and the doing.

It is not that a Natural needn't work—the ones I know are among the hardest workers I've met. But their work is different. There is an innate ecstasy to it. Some signature of the divine.

"God made me fast," says the Olympian sprinter Eric Liddell, in that famous movie scene. "And when I run, I feel His pleasure."

It was Craigslist that brought me to Pasha.

Boxing coach, the ad said. Former world champion. \$80/hour.

“I’m in the wrong business,” I quipped, standing in the tiny gym for the first time, handing him the money in crisp 20s.

“Do you want to be a boxer or what?!” he barked.

It was the first time I would hear his thick accent, indistinctly European and charming in its harshness. I would later learn that it was Flemish Dutch, with a strain of German stirred in by years spent in Austria’s amateur circuit.

Pasha’s contest record was 159-0 as an amateur and 21-0 as a professional. He was a small man, but full of big and wild ideas; at times capable of extraordinary subtlety, at other times as coarse and crude as a sailor. He had a thousand theories about the secret natures of things: of what the government was putting in the water to control our minds, of obscure loopholes in the tax codes that would make us rich, of misinterpreted histories and manufactured wars.

His days of glory had left an irrepressible shine on him, though he had very little to show for all his devisings—in his mid-40s, overweight, and part owner of a run-down gym that stood in the shadow of an ancient paper mill. But that gym, and its athletes, were like his children. As proud as any parent, he could be seen each evening pacing the lines of the ring we’d drawn with duct tape on the old mat, grinning and taunting us with avuncular

glee.

After ten weeks of training, Pasha had still not taught me how to throw a punch. We'd spent the first twenty hours together working entirely on footwork. The punches wouldn't matter, he insisted, if the footwork wasn't perfect.

The only thing there really is to know about footwork in boxing is that you never want to cross your legs—they should never face your opponent on the same line. If you're standing straight and you want to go left, you move your left foot to the left first, and only then move your right foot to join it. If you want to move forward, you move your front foot forward, and only then move your rear foot to join it. And so on. The reason for this is that crossing your legs compromises your balance when you take a hit. Line your legs up the wrong way against a skilled boxer, and you will be on your ass in a heartbeat.

"This is why it's called 'boxing,'" Pasha explained, sipping from the flask he'd pull out sometimes, when our sessions ran late into the evening. "If you draw the footwork on the mat, it should always look like a box."

"Okay," I said, shuffling about. "Makes sense."

"I just made that up," Pasha scorned. "Are you always so gullible?"

I kept shuffling as he cackled.

Then he stopped, and said: "Does it feel awkward? It should feel

awkward."

"No," I shrugged, densely. "Feels easy."

Four months later, Pasha taught me how to wrap my hands. Painstaking and precise, he showed me how important it was to spread my fingers as I wrapped the palm, to reduce pressure on the knuckles and avoid breaking the fingers' fragile bones. When we finished, he finally said it.

"You need gloves," he said. "Make sure you go and buy white gloves."

Putting them on for the first time, I asked him why white.

He explained that it was because white is the color of things that move swiftly, like light, while black is the color of things that stay in place, like ink, or earth.

It would be another month before Pasha had me working mitts, and a year before he taught me the left hook. He insisted until the end that there was no "true" right hook.

You must understand that a good punch is a motion made with the whole body. The jab's power starts from the rear leg pushing from the ground, on the opposite side of the body but in a *straight* line, and the blow should land just as the front foot moves forward and hits the ground. The cross also starts from the rear leg, but its power comes from the shotgun swivel of the hips,

as the rear side of the body propels the rear hand straight and through.

I fear I lack the skill to adequately describe what goes into a good left hook. A well-thrown hook is a human marvel, like a feat of engineering or a work of art. It is enough to say that the hook comes from the front leg pushing up and turning inward until the knee is perpendicular to the body. "So how can there be a right hook?" Pasha would say, shrill and stubborn. "How can your back leg turn inside? There's no power. The right hook is just a round cross."

But I learned the right hook anyway, mostly from fights on Youtube, and much to Pasha's chagrin. (The best right hook you'll ever see is thrown in the first round of the fight known as '*The War*'—the best round of boxing in history—between Tommy Hearns and Marvin Hagler, in 1985. Hearns' hand breaks when the punch lands. Watch: you'll see it.)

The difference between feeling an untrained punch and a trained one is difficult to describe, but hard to overstate. An untrained punch might unsettle you, might paint a bruise on your skin. A trained punch will *rearrange* you.

One day, after a round of target training, Pasha cocked his head to the side and said: "You know, you might be a natural!"

I chuckled and raised my gloves to begin the next round. Instead of raising the mitts, he crossed them against his chest, and with no trace of levity or warmth, he said: "No, I mean, you *really*

might be a natural."

I beamed the rest of the day. I had little idea of what he meant, but I felt filled with some new purpose. I couldn't wipe the smile from my face. I felt like a bastard prince who'd stumbled upon some unclaimed throne. I struggled to focus on the lesson, my mind racing as I followed my feet around the ring.

"Stop bouncing!" Pasha sneered. "You look like a bunny."



T I I T

2006

Somewhere, a bell sounds. I've just won my first amateur bout.

Just nine hours ago we'd touched down in Las Vegas, and now I had a fight under my belt. A real fight. A real win. It had gone the distance, but it had not been close. My training had paid off. At some point during the whirlwind of emotion and movement following the match, Pasha buzzes around me, pushing people out of our way.

"Let's get fucked up!" His wide face leers in my view as I try to catch my breath. "Let's get you fucked up and go to a strip club!"

He turns and bounds towards me, spilling more whiskey. Even drunk, he still has the unmistakably intentional gait of a fighter. He gives me a glass, raises his, and says with a smile as wide as the lights cast by the Strip itself, "You ready for tonight?" Our glasses clink together, and we drink.

The drug in my drink (Clomethiazole, I learn later) works quickly, and I awake the next morning, shaking off the cobwebs of deep coma. I have been asleep for 16 hours. Pasha is leaning

on the door, our bags packed at his feet, his arms crossed over his chest.

“What the fuck, man?” I ask.

“What? You thought I’d let you go out in Vegas?”

He throws me a shirt and lifts our bags.

“Flight’s in an hour.”

“The work is the fight,” Pasha used to say to us. “The fight is a dance.”

For Juan and I, work meant very different things.

For me, the sport’s nuances came as naturally as breath. The sidling footwork felt simple. When facing a punch, instinct told me to keep my head forward and down, protecting the chin, instead of pulling it backwards and up, leaving it vulnerable, like most. As I began sparring, I learned that I had a strong chin—blows to the “button,” the small area on the outside of the chin, meant to swivel the neck and cause loss of consciousness, were less effective.

One day, Pasha explained to me what he’d truly meant that day in the gym, when he’d called me “a natural.” It wasn’t a phrase he’d used casually. He had been coaching boxing for 20 years now, and those athletes with the rare spark of inborn talent had become as distinct to him as night from day. The naturals, he explained, start with finesse, and then build upon it. Everyone else was left

to build a foundation from the ground up, and hope one day to find finesse.

“My natural,” he’d say, always smiling, a name he would come to call me often. But arrogant, young, and angry, I used my raw talent as an excuse to avoid growth. While I was a natural, I struggled to be anything more.

And while Pasha taught me how to box, it was Juan who taught me how to work.

Precisely because it was not natural for him, Juan poured himself into the sport of boxing. And nowhere was the disparity in our work ethics clearer than in roadwork. We must have run a thousand miles together, Juan and I. The first four miles were easy for both of us. By mile seven I would struggle, Juan encouraging me in his stoic way. I never made it more than ten.

I’d stop, bowed over and spent, and watch Juan’s silhouette disappear into the dusk. He seemed to be running even faster, as if trying to outrace the old mill’s shadow as it grew longer and longer.

For a few years, I fought with fair success at a weight of 155, and at various catchweights between 148 and 166. But my career went nowhere. I grew tired of the sport, and the novelty of my natural talent had long since worn off. I was too good a boxer to be a great one.

Around that time, I found trading. And while my boxing coach had recognized the signs of a natural in our first few sessions together, no one would ever lay that charge at my door as a trader.

Where the footwork had come so easily in boxing, this learning curve seemed impossible, and I struggled to find a foundation. Where in boxing, I could correct a mistake with a moment's attention and a few words from my coach, a mistake in trading seemed to press and punish me to the last. I was always in the wrong place at the perfectly wrong time. Each accident was an errant thread that threatened to unravel the tapestry I'd so delicately made.

I lost my first account, and then my second. Soon I'd paid more in tuition than I'd ever hoped to make in wage.

At one point, certain that my mind had been wired with some allergy to this craft, I resolved to make up for what I lacked in talent with indicators and automation. A year into that, I'd found what I thought was the Holy Grail of indicators, and I went to work with renewed ambition. Only to lose that account, and the next.

Nothing about this was effortless or natural at all.

Here's how it works—when you begin, you are an unrepentant mess. Everything you do within sight of the starting line is worthless. Set it all on fire. Use the light to begin again.

In boxing, you begin as a riddle of limbs. Maybe you've just walked into a gym, all bold and unbowed. Maybe your coach spends a season teaching you simply how to move. Either way, the first punches you throw won't hurt a fly. You'll slowly learn that the 'sweet science' is not so much sweet as it is sweaty. Your body will be an intransigent clay. It has no more interest in being shaped by you than it does in getting up two hours early to do the shaping.

Trading is not much different (nothing worth doing at all is much different).

Later on in a trading career, when you have learned a great deal about yourself, the method is just a part of you. It sits quietly in a cavity you've carved out for it somewhere above your neck and between your ears, like a sixth sense or a second language, waiting to be called on.

But for the first two years, your method is not at all a part of you. It is much, much more like a very shitty pet. You spend a lot of time yelling at it, trying to decide whether to feed it or kill it, and wondering how sometimes it can be so lovely when most of the time it is so wretched and so fucked. How did it even come to be in your life? And then, with a wistful smile, you remember.

"God damn it," you shriek at your method, ransacking your house, turning up the sofa and bed and pushing around chairs.
"I'm trying to take you for a walk!"

It has hidden its own leash again.



N PROCESS AND PASSION

The work is the fight. The fight is a dance.

Where can I find a Pasha of my own? The student asks.
Who will teach me how to trade?

Set that aside for now.

Here is what I've learned. Here are the things I saved from the fire. Here is what I brought with me, what I pulled through the breach.

FIRST

There are only two things we must concern ourselves with. That there is room for vision, and that there is time for work.

When you go to begin something, when you think something may be calling your name, you must ask yourself—is there room for vision? Is there time for work?

If there is no room for vision—if the stage is too crowded, if the wavelengths are too weighed down with voices to bear one more—do something else.

If there is no time for work—if your day is poured into a career, or a family, and you cannot make time to master something new—keep doing those things. Do those things better. That is your path.

But if there is room for vision, and time for work, you must begin. Begin immediately: there are less impediments than ever to beginning.

SECOND

The grind is a simple, but heartbreaking arithmetic: the exchange of ineffable sacrifice for incremental improvement.

The most important part of the grind is process. This is because when you go to work on process, process goes to work on you. It improves you, even when you don't improve it. It is a precious treasure held in your careless hands, and it will hold you like a precious treasure even when you do not deserve it.

Process will change you in several ways. One of these changes comes when you begin to evaluate your efforts not on their outcomes, but on their origin. A punch for example, is thrown either well, or badly—whether it lands is only a small fraction of that evaluation.

Process also helps you develop nomenclatural habits. You name things. These names become familiar, become concepts. These concepts evolve and become refined, and varied—leading to new nomenclature. Language is a huge part of process, and a huge part of thought. An understood universe is a named one.

Process is purpose, not just a means. Love the process—honor it.

There is much more to work than what is done.

THIRD

Process and work ethic are the edges we have against the Natural. They are how we can outpace him.

Follow an imperfect process well, and sometime between the beginning of the fight and the last round, you will surpass those who follow better processes poorly. With the pace of passion burning in your head like a fever, you will begin to outshine those who make it look effortless. And one day, you will make it look effortless. You will be in disguise as the Natural. They'll ask you (as they ask me): when did you know you were born for this? You'll just smile. The things we're born to do don't almost kill us.

How do work and process help us end up ahead?

It is because we can make endless incremental improvements *that are the result of introspection that Naturals don't need*. The Natural's process is effortless but it is not introspective. Our process must be introspective because it will never be effortless.

It is good to be natural, but it is not enough. A Natural can't reverse engineer the mechanism that makes him great. He is a watch that tells time perfectly but he cannot tell you how or why. His tongue is two hands; his brain is a pinwheel of gears.

We are created with both a message, and the means to

understand or change that message. We are both watch and watchmaker—our life is spent working on the watch, telling time by it, and then working on it again when it begins to tell time poorly. I can take the watch apart with ease because I needed to—it was so terrible at telling time, in fact, that I had to take it apart entirely. Slowly, I began to rebuild it. Now the watch works, and more importantly, I can tell you why—*how*—it works.

It will require no less than *everything* you have to do this. You have to give everything, and be willing to do anything. Change yourself. Trick yourself. Drug yourself in Vegas. The grind will feel like slavery, but it is the only way out of slavery.

You will be completely alone in this. No one will care how well you do it. No one will care if you do it at all. But it *will* elevate you. I am ceaselessly reminded of this. Even in writing this—alone, fumbling around in the dark for the right word, late at night, for no reason at all—I am reminded. Work is the only unconditional redemption.

The loneliness means that parts of the journey will be quite dark. This is a good thing. The best parts of this curriculum are scraped up from the bottom of your capacity. You learn the most important things about yourself in that dark cave. You are changed there. A thousand dead ends, sacrifices, and squandered opportunities are meshed together into one great shadow. The shadow reads you litanies of your failures, sermons of loss and regret. You keep company with that shadow. You bring a piece of it out with you.

FOURTH

Boxing and trading will teach you, like many before me have said:

You are the opponent. You have already brought victory or defeat *with you* whenever you get into a ring. The real war—the war with yourself—has already been won, or lost. The name of that war is discipline.

Yes, someone else gets in that ring with you. But he is not the opponent. He is just an agent. He is just the hands.

There are two rules this war has taught me:

1. Take nothing you do not deserve. (No one has trouble with Rule 1. Everyone has trouble with Rule 2.)
2. Take no less than everything you do.

There is no revelation in the universe. There are only prompted admissions. We *force* the cosmos to speak to us, with work and effort.

The universe does not give like a womb—two beings working together to free each other from very different struggles: one from pressure, one from pain. The universe is a stubborn child, running and laughing, as if with a stolen secret it is intent never to tell. There is opportunity everywhere. Take it, even if you must force it, even if you must pry it out, even if you must steal it.

LAST

The most important thing: you have to love it. All of it. The outcome is worthless if you don't love it.

All I try to do is impress myself, every day. I win a lot and lose a lot, and try to focus on the *slope* of progress, not the oscillations. I tuck a little glory away on the days I trade like a champion and bring it out on the days I trade like a chump. The only benchmark is the day behind me. The only focus is the day to come.

When it gets hard, remember that the role of struggle is to make good things better. Struggle is not “good” because it makes good things better, but it is good that it does. Pain actualizes us in a way that pleasure cannot. Pain is a muse.

An athlete will plant effort and harvest ease. The more he plants, the more he will harvest. One cannot tinker too much with that equation. It is as linear as the rows of crops themselves.

As traders we till chaos, and chaos is a barren ground. We sow our effort and then wait to find out if our harvest is great or paltry. Sometimes the fruits are plentiful, and look something like the seeds we put in the ground, and we are rewarded for being devout. Sometimes we harvest insight. Sometimes we harvest great sums of money, and grumble about paying in taxes what most won't save in a decade. Sometimes we harvest nothing.

But we never harvest ease. It is never easy.

At your best, you are the architect of great playing-card houses: so brilliant, until a breath of wind makes you a fool again. Suddenly, everything returns to randomness. You start from square one, straining the noise for a signal. This will be your work. You must learn to love it.

Know that the path ahead of you was not paved in vain. If there is room for vision and time for work, there is greatness within your grasp. Even if your arms do not yet reach out of the hole that holds you.

Six years I gave to this craft. I worked ten hours, came home and then worked ten more. I left a woman who loved me more than life itself for the market, a pernicious bitch that tries every day to take every dime I have.

For a month in 2013, I didn't leave my house. I stopped going in to work. My boss called me every day for two weeks. One day, I picked up, and he screamed at me, asking me why I hadn't been in. I told him that I was pregnant. He fired me on the spot.

I lived entirely on cocaine and kale. I didn't shave or shower. Soiled, and with a beard below my chest, I wept and yelled like a savage. I pissed in liter bottles that stacked up on my desk. I threw food at the neighborhood kids.

It will not be easy. It will be madness.

You must love it madly.



V 2016

I was in California just earlier this year, my belly against a bar after a dear friend's wedding, when my phone rang. It was a number I didn't recognize. When I picked up, I barely recognized the voice, either. It was Juan.

"Not sure how to say this, man," he began.

Pasha had been killed in a car accident. He'd been driving, with his wife and two young kids in the car—his wife and kids were fine. They'd found booze in his system. Not a ton. But enough.

As I listened to Juan recount the events, I felt completely disconnected from his words, as if he was speaking in another language. I had been out of the sport for almost a decade, and my time in it seemed like a completely different life now, like a movie I'd seen and since forgotten. My memories were obscured, hidden behind an opaque fog that my mind could not pierce.

Then, for a moment, that fog lifted. My mind reeled and my eyes watered. A huge sadness swelled in me, cradled in my stomach and wrapped around my throat, an intensity of emotion I hadn't felt in years. I thought the discipline and control required by

trading had cut this part out of me completely, with its edges as sharp as a scalpel and as fine as a pintail comb. I forced the feeling back down, swallowing it and stifling it back inside of me.

I stared out across the Bay, where the setting sun was laid out onto the water like a bright, white path. Was it a path that led away somewhere, or a path for returning?

For the first time in years, I thought of my old white gloves. There was a broad silence on the phone.

“You okay?” Juan said.

“Yeah.”



2014

One day, out of the blue, Pasha called me and invited me to spar with Juan again, at their new gym in the city. I hadn't seen either of them in years. In the time I'd been away from the sport, he explained, Juan had entered the amateur circuit in Mexico, and had become a national champion.

Pasha taunted and teased me until I agreed to come. I showed up to the new gym the next morning, soft and lazy from a year of eating well and working less. I hadn't done much more than punch a bag in as long as I could remember. We exchanged hugs and handshakes and stories. He looked much older than I remembered. He looked tired. But the shine hadn't faded one bit.

It is hard to imagine a more violent collision of fates than Juan and I meeting again in the ring that day.

He had become a machine—a watch you use to set the time of other watches. His punches seemed to land before they were thrown. His angles were a quiet surgery of space. It took everything I had to stay on my feet for 30 seconds. Juan was improvising, playing with his food. He was no natural—he was better than natural. He had built himself into something far

better than I'd been made. He had never stopped working.

Halfway through the first round, I was forced to take a standing eight.

Through my daze of pain, I looked over at Juan in wonder. *When I was on this road with you, I remember thinking, you were half the way I'd gone.* But he was so far down that road now that it seemed like I'd never started.

He was, as a boxer, how I have felt just a few times since as a trader. A predator, a scientist in his approach to unraveling an opponent. His breathing was deep and controlled. His face was a mask—it held no trace of recognition, or emotion; no anger, no fear or pride. His eyes were dark, with perhaps just the faintest hint of a smile, like a candle blinking weakly in the corner of a cellar. *You should not be in a ring with me*, they said simply.

When the distance between two practitioners of a craft is so pronounced, when the gap in ability is so large—when you spar a great boxer, or when you watch an elite trader—it is not really even a disparity in skill. It is a disparity in subject. They are not doing the same thing as you, better. They are no longer even doing the same thing.

I thought of all those times I'd watched Juan run down that old mill road, unable to continue myself.

This is where that road had led.

If you are a Natural—if God made you fast—I'm really very happy for you. I like to think I know how it feels, in some small way. To be able to turn in any direction and still feel the wind at your back. To be able to sail with your anchor down. In another life, in the practice of a sport at which I was once modestly skilled, I'd been made in that way too. "Godspeed," one might say to a traveler. That is literally the gift you've been given. "*God's speed.*" Embrace it.

On the path of my passions, God made me slow. He knew I would only ever love what I had earned. That I would only keep what I had taken. That what I *made* was all that mattered.

You run because when you run, you feel His pleasure. That is your blessing.

I run faster because I don't. That is mine.

When the first round finally ends, Pasha lopes over to me. His face is solemn, but his eyes are brimming with some smiling wit. Or surprise? I can't tell. My face is bright red with shame and fluster, as if I'm drenched in blood instead of sweat. His gaze is gentle, and in my tailspin of embarrassment, I am hoping beyond hope that he is still able to see some dim ember of my old fire—of the warrior I once was, all fearless and fierce.

His head dips to catch my bowed gaze, his hands gently pulling up my gloves. His eyes are warm and his voice is soft as he says, "You're doing good," and fusses with the wraps on one of my

wrists. “You’re doing real good.”

In that moment, all my courage has been chased out. My arms are as heavy as beams of bent steel. My hands are lead ingots. My mind, weak and scoured, begs them to be raised, but it proves impossible.

My gloves do not weigh 12 ounces. They weigh almost 12 years. They are the weight of a path I didn’t take. They are the weight of what might’ve been.

But somewhere inside me, beneath the moment’s misery, my heart is happy just to see Pasha again. This old, grizzled friend and father figure of mine.

I don’t know that it’s the last time I’ll ever see him. I only know that although I’m older, and slower, and though the raw talent that he spent years sharpening within me is gone, I am still in some way his Natural. And with his voice in my ear, I find the strength to lift my gloves and lurch into the ring where my drubbing awaits me.

I don’t know this yet either, but *that* is the only fight that need be won.

(Go. There is still room for vision. There is still time for work).

Everything else is a dance.