

DEATH OF THE PUGILIST

Or, The Famous Battle of
Jacob Burke & Blindman McGraw

By *Daniel Mason*

Who was Burke? His beginnings.

Born a caulbearer in the Bristol slums, in the quayside heap known only as "the Rat," Jacob Burke, who would battle the great McGraw on that fateful day in 1824, was a winter child of the stevedore Isaac Burke and the seamstress Anne Murphy. He of Bristol, son of James, son of Tom, son of Zebedee, lifters all. She of Dublin and the cursed Gemini of Poverty and Fertility: Jacob was the twelfth of eighteen children, the third of the eight who survived.

It was a typical quayside childhood, of odd jobs and shoe-shining and sporadic bouts of schooling: quinsy, croup, and the irresistible temptation of diving from the piers. In the summer he ran with the flocks of children terrorizing the streets with their play.

He grew up quickly. Thick-necked, thick-shouldered, steel-fisted, tight-lipped, heavy-on-the-brow, the boy knew neither a letter nor the taste sweet until his tenth year, when in the course of a single moon, he learned to lip out the rune on the shingle at Mulloy's Arms and stole an apple

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from a costermonger on the road to Bath. Two brothers, thinking they were bona fide Dick Turpins, had treaded into a life of brigandage, but by the grace of his mother's



daily prayers and father's belt, Jacob Burke turned from the taste of apples and back to the straight and narrow of his bloodline, joining Burke père on the docks.

On the docks he remained, lifting barrels of fish and slabs of iron cold from the sea air, until his back broadened and his forearms broke his cuffs.

The ascent of Burke, including: the Riots. Also: his early career and its vicissitudes.

At age nineteen, Burke became known.

On the quay was a man named Sam Jones, and Sam Jones was a stevedore too, lifting with Burke from dark hour to dark hour. Sam Jones was an old man of forty when one morning his foot punched a rotted board on the dock and he went down beneath a load of flounder, one hundred and fifty pounds of fish in an oak-slatted crate that snapped his neck against the railing before he slumped, slipped, limp into the sea.

Sam Jones had a month's wages coming, but the Company didn't pay his widow, and on the docks the stevedores sat down and not a boat could move. Then the owners sent out their thugs, who fell on the men with clubs and iron pokers, and from the melee exploded the Quayside Riots, of fame.

It was a newspaperman from London who first saw Burke throw a punch. When the riots were over (and Jones's wages still not paid) the newspaperman found the boy back at work, resigned, murmuring a sad, low lifter's song as he threaded the pier.

On that day (gray, preternaturally

August cold, seagulls hopping on the jetty-rail) Burke stood on the dock, a ninety-pound bag of wheat thrown corpse-like over his shoulder. The newspaperman talked a streak. Jacob, not accustomed to long converses, didn't set down the bag, said, *Yes sir*, like he was taught to speak to suits and elders, and occasionally repositioned the weight over his back. At long last the fellow drew out a calling card. *Well? What do you think? Ever fought?* asked the man, and Burke asked back: *There's a man's never fought?*

On the card was the name of a warehouse on the harbor, where over the following week Burke sent three men to the floor. They were hard affairs, fighters showing up on the minute as if it were nothing but a shakebag cock-fight. No seconds, no ropes, no purse. If the Fancy went, it was only to scout. On the third night came a man, Cairn, who made an offer.

How Muscular became known.

There are five fights that first year. Five fights and Jacob Burke wins four. They are hush matches, dueled in warehouses or country inns or levees east of the city. Broughton's rules. Bare knuckles. Twenty-four-foot ring. Round ends when a man goes down. Thirty seconds of rest, and the fight doesn't end until a man can't get back to the scratch. No gouging, no biting, no blows below the belt. No faking down to win a rest.

Cairn is his second. Also in his corner, holding his bottle, is an associate of Cairn's, a Yankee who'd once been champion in New Orleans. Yankee must have a Christian name, but he changes the subject when Jacob asks. He has a crablike way of moving, of facing you, of rising to his tiptoes when he is about to speak, and Jacob thinks these are habits from the ring.

They are good to Jacob Burke, treat him like a son. Give him breeches and spiked shoes, read him the fighters' correspondence in the *Weekly Dispatch*, get him victuals when victuals are dear. Take him to the pushing school, where they put up the socket fee and tell the girls he will be Champion of All England. There, amidst the crepe and taffeta, he is humiliated by the men's attention, feels like he's back in the ring, half-thinks Cairn and

Yankee will follow him and the girl to watch. When that winter his father is laid out with cough, they advance him money against his purses, and Jacob finds himself buying gifts for his mother and his brothers and his sisters. His winnings are small, five, ten pounds. He spends it all and borrows more.

Before each fight, Cairn takes him aside and tells him what scum the other is, makes it sound like he's some avenging angel, meting out justice to a line of murderers and thieves and virgin-defilers. But Jacob Burke doesn't much care. He likes the chance to hit and watch his man fall. A ha'penny Bristol rag, with a full page on the fistic, covers his fights but can't seem to settle on a moniker, calling him the Quayside Brawler, then Steve-dore Burke, Bruise Burke, then "Muscular," which Cairn picks up for their promotions. It's elegant, thinks Jacob. He buys a copy of the rag and brings it home, shows his mother which word on the page says "Muscular." He writes it out for her in big letters on a piece of butcher paper, which she folds and tucks into the pocket where she keeps her lice comb. To prove the magnitude of his strength, he grabs two of his youngest brothers, one in each hand, and lifts them squealing high above his head.

He begins oiling his hair back in slick rows, which does little for his looks except emphasize the weight of his brow. He listens to tales of the professional fighters. He wants to be like Gully, so he buys a scarf for an ascot. Purse rises, fifteen and twenty. Buys a stovepipe of the first and wears it at a rake. Like Cairn wears his. Like Cairn, who in his day, he learns, was a bruiser too.

His days of cutting a swell are numbered. In his fourth fight, his match comes kicking and flapping at him like a bird out of a cage. He takes a thumb to the eye and has to spend a week taped up with brown paper and vinegar. Spikes a fever, but Cairn gets a surgeon to bleed him and he's cured.

In his fifth fight, Burke defeats Bristol's Beloved. It wasn't supposed to happen; the fight was an exhibition, a setup conceived to make the champion look good taking down a specimen like Muscular, but Muscular is triumphant.

How it came about that Burke fought Blindman.

This is how it came about that Burke fought the Blindman:

In Lincolnshire, Broken Head Gall lost to the Moor, and in Liverpool, Will Skeggs beat Tom Johnson, who had no less than the great Peter Crawley in his corner, the butcher's son known in his day as the "Young Rump Steak." But Skeggs wouldn't fight Broken Head, and at Moulsey Hurst, Tom Tate lost to "Le Petit." So Broken fought Tate, but the fight was a cross, the *Weekly Dispatch* breaking the story that both men had met a fortnight before to fix. Then they went to Ted Shannon the Vainglorious, but Vainglorious knew Blindman, and Vainglorious said that if he was going to get killed, he needed a bigger purse for his widow. This left the Fancy looking for a man, and this left Burke.

The match was scheduled for February, but no one would post a farthing on Burke. So they called again on Vainglorious, but Vainglorious was gone, convicted of thieving and transported. They found a miller in Melchior Brown, from Manchester, who'd been breaking gobs on the tavern circuit under the nickname Sparrow. But Brown went down in just four rounds, and the next pick, Frank Smith the Picturesque, refused to fight Blindman's murderous fists. So again they came looking for Burke. They decided Burke's mum's blood would get the Irish out, and Blindman would draw the Scots, and if there was a riot, then all the better. Besides, everyone knew the best fighters wore the Bristol yellow, and by then Burke had moved out of the quay, showing his mettle in a pair of battles at Egan's Abbey.

Who is Blindman?

This is Blindman: Methuselah of thirty-five, icon of Scottish nationalists, hero of boys' magazines, where he was drawn in monstrous proportions, sweeping Lilliputian armies down as if clearing a table for a game of cards. A dexterous hitter of steam-engine power. Won eighteen, lost two. Baptized Benjamin McGraw, he got his nickname in a fight in '14, in the forty-third round, with eyes so swollen by the punches that he couldn't see. Refused to have his lids lanced, saying he could

beat his boy blind, and then leveled him, hard, as soon as they hit the scratch. After the fight, they asked how he'd done it and he answered, *I hit where the breathing was*. He had a patron in the Earl of Balcarres, who was said to slum with McGraw in Glasgow's most notorious. He liked to tell how he'd even been asked to be Yeoman of the Guard, but with all the stories of cursing and rough living and all the girls he'd pollinated, the offer was rescinded. In '16 he'd knocked down the champion Simon Beale in two rounds, and Simon Beale never rose again. In the famous cartoon published in the *Gazette*, McGraw was drawn shaking his fists over a gravestone, on which was written:

HERE IN THE SHADE LIES SIMON BEALE
JAW OF IRON, FISTS OF STEEL
WON TWENTY-FOUR FIGHTS WITH NERVE
AND ZEAL
AT TWENTY-FIVE SHOWED HIS ACHILLES
HEEL
TOOK JUST TWO ROUNDS FOR FATE TO
SEAL
THAT NO SOUL'S SPARED BY FORTUNE'S
WHEEL.

Of course, there wasn't a man among the Fancy who didn't doubt Jacob Burke was going to get lathered. And Burke knew the rumors, but Cairn and the Yankee said he stood a chance, that Blindman was growing old, and Burke was improving daily in strength and science.

Truth was Burke didn't need to be told. And Cairn knew, for Cairn had been organizing fights for thirteen years, and knew there wasn't anything so proud as a twenty-three-year-old, except maybe a sixteen-year-old, but try to find a neck like Muscular's on a kid. Only problem with Burke, he told him, finger pressed against his pectorals, *only problem with you*, is that Burke was too good and polite and he needed a little more meanness in him. Burke spent a good deal of time wondering about this, how a hitter could be a good man, wondering if he was good only because he was on the bottom and he couldn't be anything else, that if conditions were different and he had something going, he wouldn't be so. Once in a pub he'd heard, *There's no such thing as a sin man only a sin world*,

which he was told meant that the Devil was in everyone and it was a rare fellow who could keep him down. Then later, he started thinking that maybe he'd heard it wrong, and it should have been, *There's no such thing as a good man only a good world*, and he started repeating it enough that he couldn't remember if the basic situation was sin or good. Cairn said he was *too good*, but he knew inside that he hit because he liked the feeling of hitting the other fellow, which seemed at first like sin, but then he started thinking that if the other fellow was just like him, then the other fellow liked hitting too, and that meant he, Burke, was beating a sinner, and so he, Burke, was good, except when he looked at it another way, then the other fellow was also clobbering a fellow who liked hitting (him, Burke), this meant the other fellow was good, and Burke was a sinner for milling an upright man.

The reasoning went round and round like one of those impossible songs that never stopped, until Muscular decided that what he liked about the fight was that he didn't have to wonder about such questions, only hit, because if you didn't hit, you got hit. That was the answer!

The day approaches.

So Burke takes to training: docks in the day, dumbbells at dusk. Cairn has him running his dogs in the hills. Hits the bags of sand. Bans drink and the amorous.

The word spreads fast around Bristol. He hears a hush follow him where he walks. In the streets he's besieged by the shoe-shiners, who beg to see standing flips and then set on one another for the title of "Muscular." The girls lower their bonnets and lift their eyes when he rooster-swaggers past.

One night, on the docks, an old lifter called Booth approaches Burke as he makes his way home. Stepping in front of the boy, he grabs his forearm in a steel grip, says, *This is a fool thing*, and Jacob Burke says, *Yes sir*.

The posters go up, with sketches of the two men facing off as if they had posed together, shirtless, in ankle-boots and breeches, tied close with sashes. They say the fight will be held at Moulsey Hurst, southwest of London, but all know this is a sham to

throw off the magistrates. The papers take to calling the fight Blindman's Brag, as if it were not a fight but a showcase for McGraw. As if Burke weren't even fighting.

One night, his mother is waiting for him when he comes home. *They say you're going to get killed*, she says. *Who says that?* asks Jacob. *They all say that*, she says. *I've been to the market. They say: Make sure they promise you the purse, Annie, 'cause your boy isn't coming home.*

Unspoken, but hidden in her words, is his father, who is coughing himself to bones and hasn't been down to the docks in months. But she doesn't say Jacob should walk away. Had she, then he would have squared his jaw and proclaimed he had his honor to protect. It is because she says nothing more that the doubts begin to eel their way in.

Except he knows he can't get out even if he wants to. He owes Cairn, for the scarf, for the stovepipe, the food. Cairn says that with the purse from the fight with McGraw, he'll be paid off and then some. He decides "then some" means even more if he wagers on himself. Then he will stop.

They find a patron.

Two weeks before the fight, Cairn quarries a Patron in a Corinthian named Cavendish; the rest of the purse is put up by the Pugilistic Club.

Cavendish meets Burke and Cairn at Ned Landon's public house. He's a dandy: curls, perfume, talking proud and fast and high. Wants to be called Cav, but Jacob calls him Mister Cavendish, and he smiles. He made his blunt during the Regency, and flaunts it, burns a bill before Burke's eyes. Recites a fight poem that he had published in *Bell's Life*, full of lettery words Burke has trouble getting his ears around. Cavendish tells a story about a fighter, laughing, says, *Poor Tom had his eyes knocked from his head. Just like that. Plop. Plop. Couldn't find work and suicided. Drank prussic. Plop.* He laughs. Burke hates him immediately, feels his whole body tense when he hears him talk. He knows Cavendish is trying to look big by making him look small, but he can't think of fast words to answer. Any other man, and he would hit him so

hard he'd lose more than his eyes. He looks to his trainer, and Cairn tilts his head, just a little, as if to say, *Easy, swallow the toad, Cavendish is putting up the purse.*

Soaked, Cavendish begins to slur. Calls a wagtail over and throws an arm around her waist. Tells Jacob to remove his shirt. Says, *Look at the symmetry, look at the strength.* Says, *Your mum's Irish, Burke?* Calls him *My little boy.* Touches his arms and says, *Look, this is pretty.* Drinks his blue ruin until it runs down his chin. Says he was a boxer, but he holds his fists with his thumbs inside.

They travel to the scene of the fight, where Burke meets a man who imparts his Philosophy.

The fight is set in Hertfordshire, in a field south of St. Albans called Dead Rabbit Heath. In St. Albans, they spend the night at a coaching inn. Cairn and the Yankee drink until they're reeling, but Muscular is too nervous to keep anything down. The Publican is an aficionado of the fistic, the walls are decorated with sketches and mezzotints of the great fighters, and Burke recognizes Broughton and Painter, and the Jews Mendoza and Dutch Sam, and Gasman and Game Chicken. He wants to be like the portraits, still and quiet and distant on a watercolor patch all alone and glorious. But among the rabble that's crowding the tavern, Muscular is cornered by a farrier, a fat, spectacled man who seems to have some reading behind him. Says he was a priest, once, which explains his fine diction, though he won't say why they stripped his soutane. *You'll be one of the greats,* he tells Jacob. *Just look at you. Maybe you'll lose tomorrow, but it doesn't matter. Just hold your own, and soon you'll be Champion.* He asks if Burke knows of the battle between Achilles and Hector, but Burke has never heard of these two fighters. The farrier shrugs it off. *You ever seen McGraw?* he asks. Burke hasn't, sketches only. *Goliath,* says the farrier. *Like someone pressed two men into one. Misshapen like that too. You'll see. Cauliflower ears. Ears? No! Cauliflower face.*

He presses on. *You want to hear my Philosophy? How are you going to win? Think, my boy. You want to win or you want to hurt him? Those are different*

things. Pastor Browne's theory of the fight—you can tell the rest—is that anger only takes a man so far. That's what all you poor boys start with: anger, needing it like a horse needs a rider. But soon that gets in the way. You boys go out and think you are fighting a boxer, but really you're fighting the world. But a good fighter, you see, like Blindman, he knows that the man he's fighting is fighting first to hurt and next to win. And he'll use it. Use your hating to get you. That's the difference. Men who fight to hurt will get it in their time. Gladiator in arena consilium capit. He'll finish you. Mill you to a jelly. Get your head up in chancery and then where will you find yourself?

Burke doesn't have an answer. He stares at the man, who's got whiskers thick as string. The man's going on about anger, and Burke's tempted to say, *There's no such thing as a sin man only a sin world. I'm just hitting.* He doesn't want to talk anymore. But he won't leave, won't go to sleep either. A tavern chant swells. *Then let us be merry/while drinking our sherry . . .*

He has a sick feeling and thinks maybe he is scared.

They gather at Dead Rabbit Heath.

The fight is to take place another two leagues from the inn, on a field not far from the road, in a soft depression between a pair of hills.

Soon after sunrise, they take a coach. They pass crowds coming up the road, on horseback or foot. It is a cold morning, the light hesitant, the fields wet with dew. There are tents set up for peck and booze. The traffic's slow, thick with broughams and horses. It takes Burke a long time to realize that the crowd is there, in part, for him. They park their carriage at a small clearing halfway up the hill. Burke gets out, followed by Cairn and Yankee. Almost immediately he is set upon by the tag-rag, who jostle him for no reason but to try to get close. They sing, *Gotta get the Blindman, or the Blindman gets you.* Muscular wears his stovepipe low over his eyes, his seconds flank him, leading him up a long path through the wet grass, over a rise and then down toward the ring. Both men hold him by his elbow. He knows it's supposed to comfort him, but there is no comfort

there. He thinks, *Where do they flank men like this?* and the answer is the gallows.

As they approach, there's a massive crowd already gathered at the ropes, and he can hear a hushing in the near. They've got two stands set up by the ring for the paying, but the crowd overflows up the hills. He looks for his opponent, but Blindman is nowhere to be seen. He wants Blindman to be there, as if Blindman's the only one who could know what he is feeling.

The ground is turned up like a pack of pigs came rooting through, but the ring is clean, neat, covered with sand, like nothing he's ever fought in. They've strung two lines of painted rope, the scratch is already chalked. He keeps his greatcoat on as Cairn goes and speaks to the judge. He feels the eyes of the crowd on him, tries to ignore them, looks down, and keeps clenching his hands again and again. Finally, he lifts his face and looks out. The hill is all men, far as the eye can reach. There's a pair of swells near him, ascots blooming, suits of bombazine, capes, and pearl buttons. *Hey, Muscle,* says one and then laughs. *I've got money on you, Muscle,* says the other. They're talking funny, and then he realizes they're mocking a brogue. He looks away.

Cairn comes back. *This's big, boy,* he says. *Ten thousand men, and not a stable free for a sleepy nag. Half the country wants to see our boy fell the Blindman.*

Cheers and jeers as his opponent approaches.

Late in the morning, McGraw arrives. Burke hears the murmurs thrumming through the crowds, then shouts going up, the hillside parting for a dark figure to come through, surrounded by an entourage. They are far off, descending the opposite slope. For an instant it is as if he is watching a shadow at sundown, the dark hulk lumbering over his seconds. A fight song materializes out of the noise, but he can't hear the words. Then suddenly, with McGraw halfway to the ring, something ugly must have been said, for the goliath lunges into the crowd. Then tumult, the black suits turning over as if they were dominoes. Burke can't tell if McGraw is swinging: it's all men coming up and falling back and shouting

and flailing like some giant sea animal thrashing in the surf. Then his seconds must have gotten hold of him, for he's pulled back, and the crowd ripples and is still. Murmurs now: McGraw is out of control, *He's an animal, they shouldn't let him fight*, but Burke knows his man did it for show, though he doesn't know if the show is for him or for the crowd that's come.

There are no more incidents. As McGraw gets closer, a quiet descends. At the edge of the ring, McGraw hands his greatcoat and hat to his second and steps inside. From his corner, Burke watches Blindman strip to his colors.

Jacob Burke has prepared himself for a giant, but he doesn't think he has ever seen such a human as this. McGraw must be eighteen stone. Six foot six at least, but the illusion of height is increased by the size of his chest and belly, which set his head back like some faraway peak. Arms as thick as Muscular's hams. Fists slung low. Skin pale blotched red. To call his ears "cauliflower" would be a compliment. Tuber is more like it, thinks Burke. Raw tuber that could break a knuckle. His nose is a gray-yellow color that makes it look like a dead man's nose. There is so much of him that it is difficult for Burke to see where the man's muscles begin: he looks like someone has taken a massive sculpture of a strong man and kept throwing clay on it in lumps, until the clay ran out. Burke doesn't even know where he is going to land his fists. It seems like certain rules, like rules against grabbing the throat, don't matter when it comes to Blindman, for Burke is uncertain where the neck ends and the head begins. He feels as if he were told to lift an awkward stone without a place to set his hands.

He knows now that he has been seduced by the promotion posters, which show the men facing off, as if they were two men fighting. This isn't two men fighting. He thinks of the games of speculation he played as a child: *If a lion fought a bear, if a turtle fought a buck, if a shark fought a giant fox. If an eagle fought a man of fire. Who would win? Who would kill whom?*

If Muscular Burke fought the monster McGraw.

It is then that Jacob realizes he has

been set up to lose, that Cairn and the Yankee could never have expected him to stand a chance against Blindman.

His pulse skitters, mad like a water bead in a hot pan.

He looks back out at the crowds. Now they stretch all the way to the crest of the hillside. The sound of their chanting is deafening. But he hears only *Blindman*, they are there to watch Blindman win or Blindman lose. Curse and praise but only Blindman's name. The crowd doesn't even seem to acknowledge Burke. Thinks Jacob: Who cheers the fox, when you've come to watch the hound?

The fight begins.

The Padders are at the ropes. There are six of them, a quintet of London coalmen and an ostler who is retired from the fistic. Their jackets are off, their cuffs rolled, fighting to keep the crowds back. Muscular realizes that while he has been lost in thought, his arms loose at his sides, his seconds have stripped him to his breeches.

He stands in a daze. He realizes he's staring into the crowd, looking for someone he knows, another lifter from the docks or—thinking frantic now—a brother, or even his mother, when Cairn whispers something in his ear. He has almost forgotten his second, but now Cairn is behind him, his hands on Burke's shoulders, massaging the massive deltoids of which he is so proud. Jacob shivers him off. Is he in on this? he wonders. How much is he being paid to have me get killed? He shakes his head as if there's poison in his ear.

Behind him, he hears Cairn's voice. *Show 'em, Muscular.* He coaxes Burke's arms into the air, and Burke flexes. *That's right, Muscular,* says Cairn. *Show the old man.*

What are the odds? whispers Jacob through his teeth. *What am I at?*

Cairn rubs his shoulders. *Don't worry, boy. You do the milling and I'll do the betting and we'll both go home rich men.* He laughs, but Jacob doesn't join him. No matter how hard he tries to throw his anger back toward the giant in the ring, he feels only betrayal, fury at his handlers for what is about to happen. The thought that Cairn and Yankee want him to lose vanishes, but

what remains is somehow worse, that he is inconsequential. The idea that they could have cared for him any more than a trainer cares for a dancing bear seems now like an absurd fantasy. He was a fool to believe. He should sit, lay it down, get back to "the Rat," to the quayside, to home.

They are called to the scratch. The judge joins the Padders in the outer ring. Burke sees Cavendish in the front row, topped in a white stovepipe that is immaculately, impossibly clean. Beside him: the jostling bettors, the flit-fluttering fingers of a tic-tac man.

The two fighters shake. McGraw's paws are like the rest of him, geologic, and while Jacob has a grip that can shatter a bottle, he cannot even get a purchase on the Scotsman's hand.

Time is kept by a Lord from Essex. The judge launches his cant, promising strength and speed and stamina, *a battle of brawn, a beautiful combat, a most severe contest for the benefit of Honorary Gentlemen.* The crowd erupts.

May the best man win, says the judge.

Fists up.

Fists up and in the crouch, Burke can't hear the bell for all the shouting. Before him, McGraw holds his pose, shoulders squared, his face a mask, waiting for the boy to come. Burke wants to strike, but he can't move, can't see a line through the giant's arms. Blindman makes a kissing motion and the crowd roars. *Muscle muscle,* comes a taunt, and out of the corner of his eye, Burke sees the two swells laughing, and beside them Cavendish doing nothing to fight off a smile. Off the scratch, he strikes Blindman's jaw. McGraw doesn't budge. Again Burke strikes, and Blindman stops it with his left. His forearm barely gives. Blindman makes a face of mock surprise, brushes his arm as if brushing off a fly. Flourishes his fists. It's a show for the crowd, and they reward it with laughter. Burke rushes again, left to Blindman's jaw, feeling at the same time as if a brick has come down against his head.

Muscular down.

Cairn takes him back in the corner, sits him, whispers, *Tire him, Muscular, feet, Muscular, quick on the pins,*

dance like Mendoza, but Burke pushes him away, is back to the scratch before the Lord says thirty. Throws the instant Blindman gets up from his corner. *Foul!* he hears, but before they can pull him back, he's down again, unaware of what happened. He tastes dirt this time, hears the judge call, *First blood*, and feels his cheek is wet. Hears numbers. Can't distinguish the crowd's shouting from the roaring in his ear.

Back to the scratch and Muscular down.

Back to the scratch. Blindman charges. Muscular turns, plants a fist in McGraw's neck and the giant tumbles. The hillside roars like artillery fire. Then McGraw is up, his flesh shifting and shimmering, and Burke advances. He can't think now; he can only move.

The fight continues.

The rounds seem to roll through him. Hook to Blindman's ear. Burke to the mouth. One-two. One-two. Blood, tooth, and Muscular down. Jab to nose and Blindman down. Back to the scratch and Muscular pounds to the pudding bag, to the ear, to the ear, and the ear seems to crumple, break like a potato beneath a heel. Blindman down. Back to the scratch and Blindman rushes. Breadbasket, breadbasket, Muscular down. Topper in the ear and Muscular down. Pirouette, turn, and Blindman rushes. Muscular back, catches a heel and both men down. Back to the scratch. Fast in the eye, Muscular down. Again in the peeper, Muscular down. Blindman muzzled and Muscular down. Blindman coughs, spits out a grinder. Chop and chop and Muscular down. Back to the scratch and Muscular down. Blindman Blindman, Muscular down.

Eyelids swollen, tasting blood on his tongue, his knuckles wet with gore, Burke sits in the corner, letting Caim's hands caress his chest, Yankee sponge his face. He feels as if his men aren't there. He's being touched by bird's wings. He wants at McGraw, needs to hit. It hurts to breathe, he doesn't know how much lung he's got in him, but something in him says that he's taken the worst. That Blindman's not going to hit any harder than he's hit but that Burke's still got it, still could

heave a load. He murmurs a lifters' song: *Still lift the barrel still lift the barrel still lift the barrel, Hey! Twelve kittens in the kitchen and another on the way.* His lips, swollen, blubber. He rinses his mouth with Old Tom, rises before the thirty, and is at the scratch before Blindman stands.

By now the crowd is thundering, pressing up against the rope, throwing punches at the Padders, curses flying. Again Burke rushes. McGraw catches his wrist this time, turns with the force and throws him, coming down with his knee in Burke's gut. Muscular's mouth fills with bile, pants go wet. He hears hissing and a cry of *foul*, but McGraw, snorting through his broken nose, doesn't care, he cradles Burke's head, whispers something rasped into his ear, kicks Muscular in the flanks as he's standing up. Again, *Foul!* but this is coming from the crowds, closer, and Burke sees a man breach the outer ring, hurling ugly curses at the Scot, followed by another and another, and Burke, up on his knees, thinks, *Here we go*, and he isn't even standing when the punches start flying.

Pandemonium in the ring: the two fighters join forces to restore order.

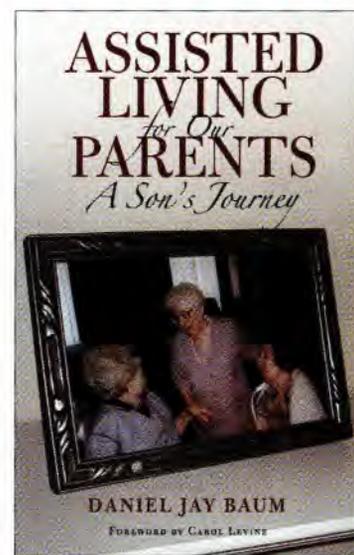
A gasman hits a liveryman hits a brewer hits a baker. Two swells pound each other as if to send each to his maker. An ostler lands a muzzler while his best man lands a quaker.

The Padders overwhelmed, the ropes broken, the crowd implodes into the ring. They don't seem to be after the pugilists but one another, though Muscular, spinning, can't seem to make heads or tails of what's happening. There's a mob come down cursing the Scot. There are canes swinging and stones thrown and someone heaving a rope, and the air's filled with curses, all kinds of animal and things that are going to be done and a liberal use of the Monosyllable.

Then Muscular and Blindman have joined the Padders, pounding to clear the ring, because both are hungry for the fight. Blindman is red-faced and breathing heavy. Rested, Muscular feels the strength in him returning.

By the time the riot is cleared, a

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dozen men have been carried off. Then the ropes are restaked, the colors returned. A quiet settles, but the judge is still shouting, threatening to end the fight unless order is completely restored.

But what has become of Muscular's eyes?

Time has played Blindman's ally: by now, Muscular can barely see, both of his eyes are weeping, swollen shut, crusting over. With the stage reclaimed and the Padders back at the ropes, the boxers repair to their seconds. In the corner, Cairn runs his thumbs over Muscular's lids. *You're out*, he says. *You're out or I cut them*, and Jacob just nods. Cairn pushes his head back, grabs the lancet, grabs his face, and the relief is immediate. His face streams with the claret, his cheeks feel as if he is crying.

Back to the scratch, and McGraw is fighting dirty, but the judge lets it fly. He's angry, thinks Burke, he knows it shouldn't have gone on this long. It was supposed to be easy, done. Face contorted, McGraw rushes, gets a hand on Muscular's neck, drives him into the rope. Muscular down. Cairn calls *Foul!* but Burke's back to the scratch.

Now it's Burke who leads. Forward now, and Blindman back. Fists up and McGraw circles, spits, coughs, scratches the ground. Blindman back, Burke forward, watching, waiting, watching, and then he sees it, sees his channel in. Not now, but two moves from now, like a game of checkers. Feels the warmth in his arms, feels joys, thinks, *This is glorious*. Feints high and McGraw goes high and then Jacob Burke is inside. Left to the jaw, left, and Blindman ducks. Straight into Burke's right and rising.

Jacob Burke knows then that the fight is over. *Hears* it, something slacken. Something soft, something broken in the jaw or in the face, something creaking in the temple. He's worked shipbreaking at times, and there's a feeling when a sledgehammer comes against a beam and nothing breaks, but you know the next time you swing it's going to give. The fight's over. Blindman is standing, but Burke has only to wait and Blindman will fall. An expression comes over Blindman's face, a puzzled expression,

like he's hearing a song he's never heard before.

At which point Burke has a very complicated thought.

Jacob Burke's thought takes the form of a memory.

In his childhood on the docks, like all boys, Jacob and his friends spent days in games of earnest battle, clashing sticks and throwing stones long into the dark, chasing and fighting and raising hell. They played by the universal rules of cruelty and chivalry and thrill, thrill to strike and throw and be thrown at, and throwing and chasing one day Jacob and three friends had cornered an enemy knight and were taunting him before delivering the *coup de grâce*, which in such a situation, with such easy prey, typically consisted of touching him with the stone or tossing it lightly, as the boy was trapped against a wall and had no way to escape. But that afternoon the boy, who was a bit younger than the rest, went scared on them and started to cry, and, surrounding him, the others began to laugh and throw, and then the boy was crying louder, which only made the others laugh louder and throw harder, and then the boy was slobbering for his mother, and they all went grabbing more stones and throwing, and Burke reached down and felt his fist close around a stone he knew was too big for that game, but the crying had removed from him any restraint, and, laughing, he took hard aim at the head of the boy and he threw.

The end.

Watching from the crowds, amidst the cheers and curses, there's not a soul that day at Dead Rabbit Heath that knows what Jacob Burke knows, that the fight is already over. For Blindman's standing and Blindman's fists are still up, and if he's slack in the lip no one can see from what Muscular Jacob Burke has done to his face. They'll know, in breaths they'll know and for years they'll talk about it, but in this half-second between Muscular's knowing and the crowd's knowing, it's as if Muscular has been left alone with a knowledge and an omnipotence only God should have.

There is a moment when a lifter

takes a load and heaves it onto his shoulder, when the massive weight, the sack or the crate or the barrel at the top of its heave, becomes briefly weightless, and the lifter, no matter how tired he may be, poised between his action and the consequences of his action, feels both an incredible lightness and the power of the weight at the same time. It is as if he is master of the weight, not struggling below it, and Jacob Burke has learned over the years to seek this joy, cling to this joy, knows secretly that in the misery of everything else, there is one moment when he is king.

Maybe he thinks this or maybe he feels it in the movement of his arms, for now there is no difference between thinking and feeling and hitting.

Blindman's fists are down and Muscular comes in on his man. He is feeling for the break, the hole, the soft, searching again for that seam, hitting, hitting, that half-second gone, and now there's no turning back, hitting, knowing that when he'd told himself he hit so he wouldn't be hit he was lying, because beneath it, the reason he hit was that there was joy in hurting, real joy in the simplicity and the freedom and the astounding number of answers in a single movement of his arms. Later he'll have pity, but not now, now there is no pity, not because he is cruel but because there is no more Ben McGraw. For Muscular is alone, mind clear of all but such joy and beauty as he moves in, striking his man, searching, knowing there is only one way that he wants this to end, only one ecstatic way for it to end, only one, and hitting he thinks, *Blindman I'm hitting Blindman I'm hitting Cairn I am hitting Cairn I'm hitting Cav I'm killing Cairn I'm hitting Cav I'm hitting Blindman I'm hitting Cav*, and then feeling the soft thinks, *I'm in the break* thinks *in the crown* thinks *in the line* thinks *into McGraw*

thinks *there is a line into McGraw into the soft into McGraw into the crown of Ben McGraw into the temple of McGraw the broken temple of McGraw*

The broken temple of McGraw.

thinks *there is no such thing as a fast man only a slow world*
thinks *break break*
Blindman down. ■