SHADOW BOXERS

SWEAT, SACRIFICE & THE WILL TO SURVIVE IN AMERICAN BOXING GYMS

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For the coaches and trainers

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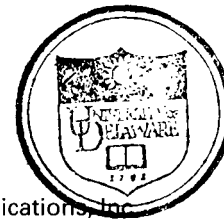



JACK HARRIS
6 ROUNDS - SEMI-FINAL - MIDDLEWEIGHTS
TOM HOFFARTH VS. JIM BARON
4 ROUNDS - PRELIMINARIES
TONY FRESNO VS. BUDDY RICHARDS
RALPH HERNANDEZ VS. ERRETT SMITH
PAUL CRUMRINE VS. RICHARD THOMAS
DOUBLE DYNAMITE
IVECO
SALUD, RESPETO Y CONTROL

MIRROR, MIRROR

Carlo Rotella

Larry Holmes, unretired once more, had returned to the gym in earnest. Word that he was sparring again went around Easton, Pennsylvania, his hometown and headquarters. He was preparing to fight Brian Nielsen in Denmark for the nearly meaningless IBO title; after that, perhaps Holmes and George Foreman would finally settle things between them in the ring. It was October 1996; Holmes, who had been heavyweight champion from 1978 to 1985, would soon be forty-seven years old.

The watchers were back in the gym, too. Holmes had a crew of paid cornermen and helpers, but a looser circle of informal observers hung around the Larry Holmes Training Center just to see what he was up to. They – we – had been on hiatus during his most recent retirement, but now it was time for the watchers to reconvene.

Cliff, a thick-built, patient man who served as one of Holmes's seconds, was sitting on one of the folding chairs at ringside, waiting for the boss to come out of his locker room. Alan, who dropped in from time to time to videotape sparring sessions for his private collection, was also sitting in a ringside chair, waiting for Holmes. Seemingly engrossed in fiddling with his video camera, Alan said to nobody in particular, "I wonder if this Nielsen is the stiff everybody says he is." After a pause, Cliff looked over at him and said, "Well, he's big, and even if he is European, he *is* undefeated." Having enticed Cliff into a conversation, Alan put down his camera, turned to face him, and covetously complimented him on his ball cap, which bore a Larry Holmes logo. Cliff looked over at me, jerked his head at Alan, and said, "If he wants something you got . . . " Cliff broke off, shaking his head, but he placated Alan by promising to see if he could get him a cap, then explained how to keep it clean: "You just put your caps in the dishwasher, on top with the glasses. Come out beautiful."

Alan and Cliff fell to commiserating about how hard it was to make a living. Alan had to drive all over the state to assemble bagel ovens for ten dollars an hour. Holmes would not provide make-work day jobs for his crew, so Cliff hired out to other fighters, too. Cliff needed to make some extra money to hire a lawyer for a young man in his family who had gotten into trouble. "It was self-defense and all," Cliff said. "He took a box cutter away from the other guy, one of those big ones, took it away and hurt him. I mean really hurt him." Alan murmured, "Good, good," not getting the point. Cliff gave him a flat, disgusted look. Their conversation petered out.

They turned to watch two gloved-up middleweights, a novice named

Left: Windy City Boxing Gym, Chicago.
Above: a spectator comments on the action at the Grand Avenue Gym, Portland, Oregon.

Russell and a more experienced southpaw, who had climbed into the ring and were walking about with studied aimlessness, waiting for the bell. When it chimed, they began sparring. Russell, a student at a nearby college, poked out his left as a sort of pro forma gesture to set up a heavy straight right, his best punch. His opponent, the southpaw, moved with greater purpose and snapped his jab more decisively than Russell's. They quickly fell into a pattern of sparring: Russell took a jab or two in the face as he came in to throw his one-two, then they fought in close for a while, during which time he forced the southpaw to retreat but took another shot or two for his trouble. Infighting, Russell had a beginner's tendency to duck his head and throw his punches blind. Effort, punishment, and mounting frustration turned Russell's pale face a dark, uneven red.

In the second round, warming to the encounter, they whacked each other more forcefully. A bright worm of blood crawled out of Russell's nose and into his mouth. He followed the southpaw as before, bored in to throw the pawing jab and the hard right as before, took his lumps as before. At one point, wishing to employ his superior strength but unable to land enough punches, Russell jammed both of his forearms in the southpaw's face and drove with his legs, just pushing. The southpaw, his head bent back sharply over the top strand of the ropes, made a high snort of surprise and pain. After that, they traded with increasing wildness, oversized gloves and headgear accentuating the sound of the blows. The third round offered more of the same, with Russell taking three punches to give one. He looked mad, blood smeared over the middle of his face. The southpaw looked mad, too, and embarrassed to have made that odd sound when Russell forced his head back over the top strand.

Just as the bell sounded to end the third round, Holmes and his cornermen came out of his locker room and moved toward the ring. One of them, Charlie, a bald man with broad forearms, made a shooing-away gesture with both hands and called out, "That's enough." The middleweights climbed out through the ropes on the other side. They had wanted to go another round, although there probably would not have been much value in it. They were not really sparring anymore; they were just fighting.

Cliff got up and went over to work the corner of Holmes's sparring partner. Alan got up to film the proceedings. Holmes, hands wrapped, wearing blue sweats and a blue T-shirt with the sleeves cut off to give his thick arms and shoulders room to work, was putting cotton balls in his ears and smearing his face with petroleum jelly. One of his cornermen approached with the gloves. Time to get down to business.

The watchers, too, got down to business. Charlie settled himself outside one corner of the raised ring, Cliff outside another. Saoul Mamby, Holmes's chief second and trainer of record, a resourceful little guy who had held the WBC super lightweight title back when Holmes was heavyweight champion,

Above: Wild Card Boxing Gym, Los Angeles.

took a third corner. A dapper fellow named Ben, whose official job title was "driver" and whose duties included playing an endless checkers tournament with Holmes during downtime, took the fourth. They all struck intent poses – arms crossed and frowning, or one foot up on the ring steps, elbow on raised knee, chin on palm – as their boss circled in the ring, jabbing from time to time and smothering his sparring partner's hooks. The cornermen had spent cumulative weeks, months of their lives watching Holmes hit and not get hit; they were as good at watching him do it as he was at doing it.

Wherever fighters train, watchers gather, observing in silence the familiar routines of the gym. Some just hang out on their own time, like dissolute railbirds in a pool hall, but watching in the gym is also an important element of what cornermen, matchmakers, gamblers, and reporters *do*. It can be a profession, not just a form of idling.

Holmes, famously thrifty, needed his cornermen for only a couple of hours a day, so he did not pay them a living wage. But he did pay them something for their time, and there was not much for them to do other than watch. Their gym duties were minimal: wrap his hands, give him water or Vaseline or the bucket when he needed it, hold the mitts while he banged them, rub down his shoulders and arms to keep him loose. It made Holmes feel good, of course, to have attendants, competent men alert to his welfare and demands, an articulate living shell that smoothed his passage through the world and reminded him of his importance. But he did not need much encouragement – an occasional "That's it, champ" or "Be first!" would do – and he certainly did not need their advice on how to box. He had been fighting for most of his life, often against the most potent big men in the world, and his style was not going to change. No matter who the other guy was, Holmes would jab and throw looping rights off the jab, blocking and slipping return punches or scuttling them with well-timed jabs. He did not need anybody to remind him to stick and move and entangle incoming punches in his long arms, banging his opponent's biceps with his elbows when he did.

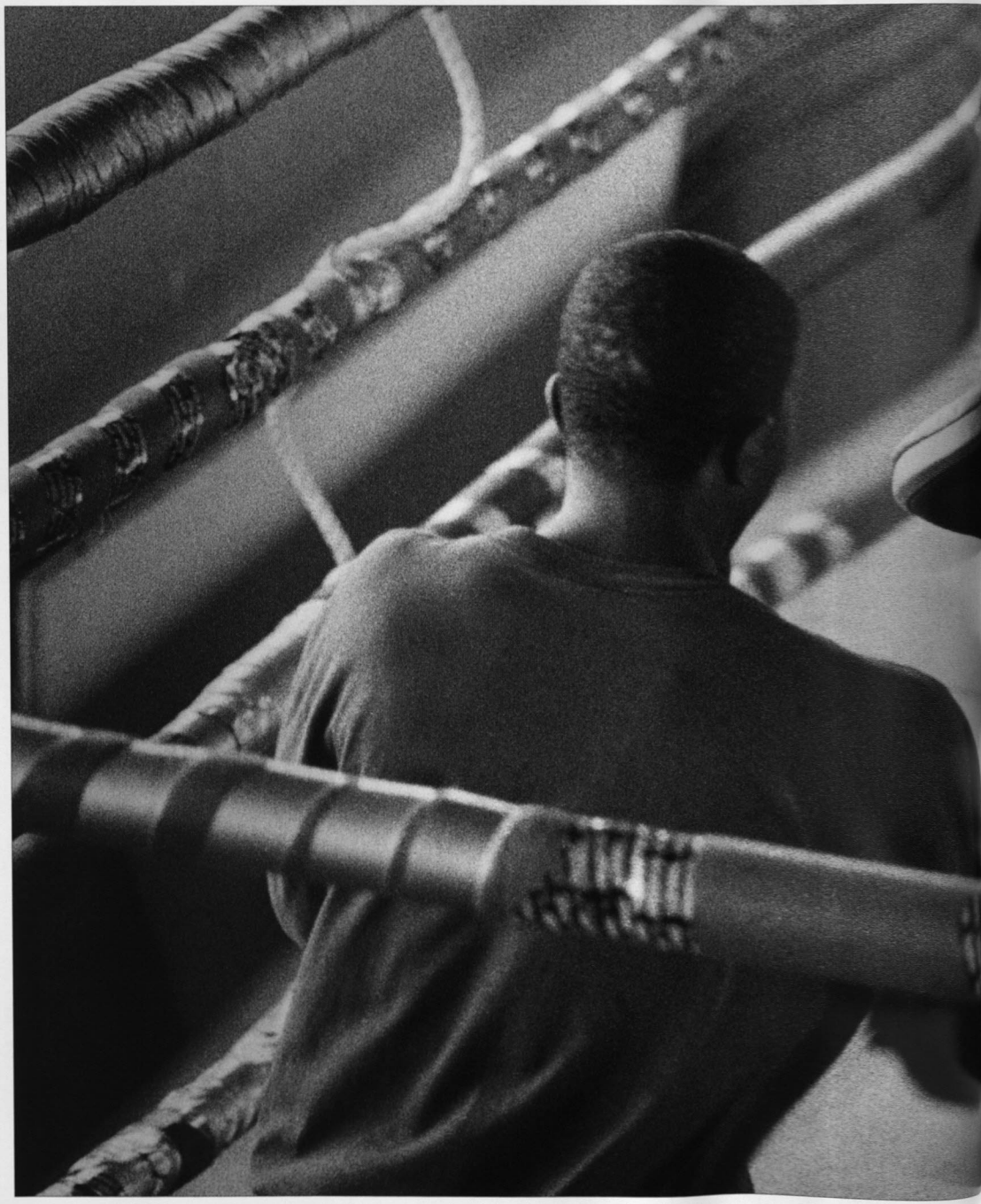
It had been a long time since Holmes heeded the independent opinion of a cornerman. When he fought Gerry Cooney, for instance, on a hot June night in Las Vegas back in 1982, he had made it clear to his distinguished corner that all he wanted was basic service. "Just keep me cool," he told Eddie Futch and Ray Arcel, two of the wisest and most respected trainers around. Holmes was thirty-two then, and he already had a long fighting history: scrapping informally in his teens until he learned the fundamentals of boxing from a gentle retired fighter; absorbing more advanced lessons in craft while serving as sparring partner for Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, and Earnie Shavers; fighting up through an especially deep and dangerous division during the heavyweight golden age of the 1970s; beating Shavers, Ken Norton, Ali, and everybody else in his way; defending his title eleven times. When he fought Cooney, in a bout that stirred popular passions and was then the most lucrative of all time, he ignored Futch's tactical advice between rounds. When Arcel tried to give him smelling salts, Holmes ordered Futch to keep that crazy old man away from him. What Holmes wanted from the pair of sages in his corner – who between them had 152 years of exquisitely tempered experience on this violent planet – was ice, water, damage control (although Holmes rarely suffered cuts), and to stay the hell out of his way while he fought his fight.

That's all he wanted from his corner now. At forty-six and counting, Holmes had grown old in ring-time. Having saved and invested his purses, he was financially independent of any promoter or backer, and he saw no reason to shell out for a big-name trainer. He had Saoul Mamby, but, tricky as Mamby had been as a boxer, he was no professional trainer. Holmes had Cliff and Charlie, too, and Ben, but in essence he trained himself. Mostly they watched

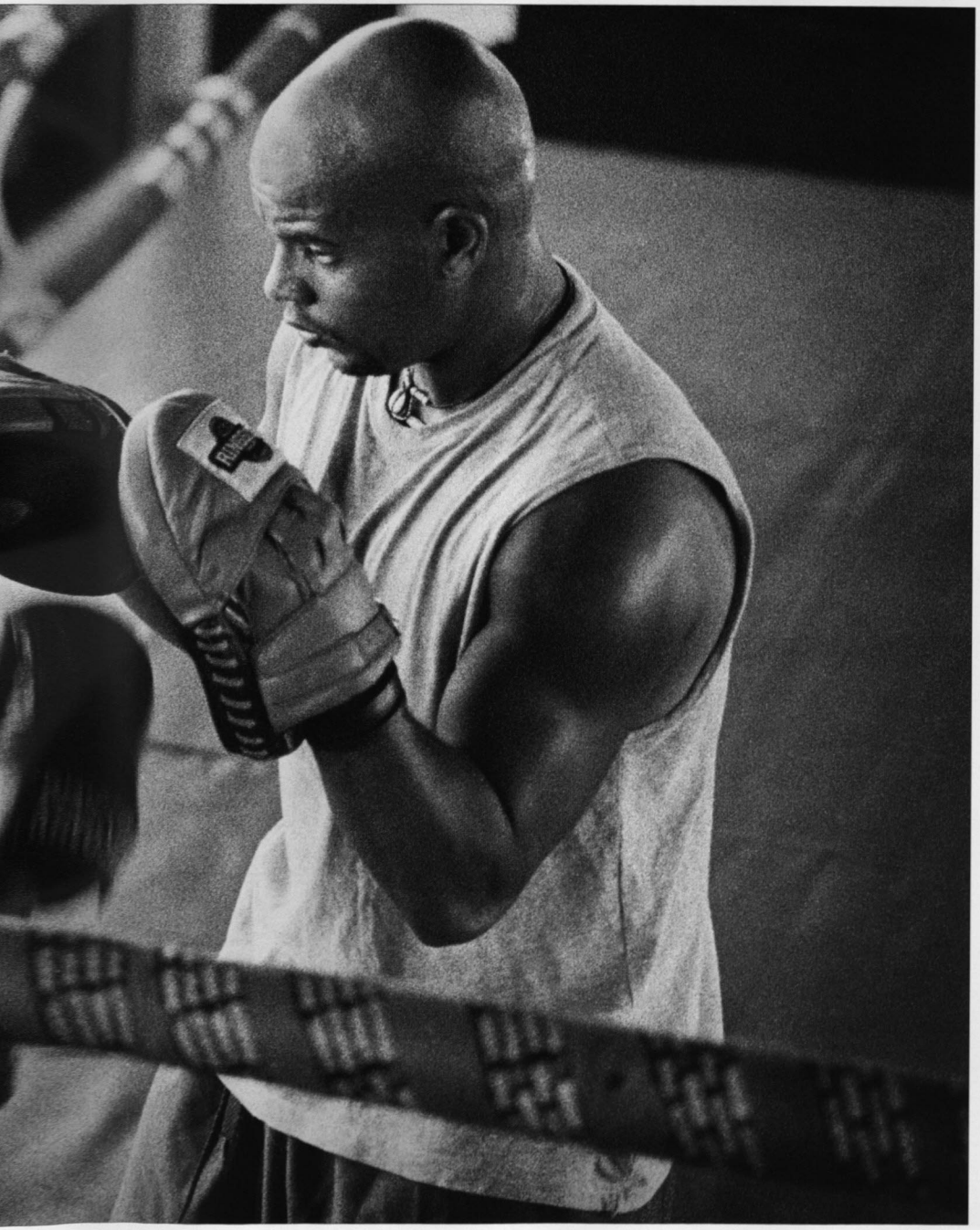
him do it. What, besides an employee's expression of fealty to his employer, was that good for? What practical utility was there in Holmes's cornermen watching him train?

The answer, I think, is that they served as projections of Holmes, whose classical boxing style and sheer working drive suffused the gym and anybody who spent time in it. Watching him day after day over the years, his intimates had absorbed his moves, his priorities, his instincts; they had learned to know boxing as he knew it, to see it as he saw it. So if Cliff or Charlie told the boss that he was spending too much time with his back to the ropes in a sparring session, the cornerman served as the vehicle by which Holmes, in effect, reminded himself to stay in the middle of the ring to take best advantage of his long jab and elegant footwork. The cornerman was not really offering his own opinion – rather, his eyes were Holmes's, extended from the fighter's body on invisible stalks so that Holmes could observe himself, comparing his own performance on any given day to a composite ideal he had assembled over the years by watching himself train and fight through his cornermen's eyes. As instruments of Holmes's vigilant attention to himself, the cornermen were, in that sense, like the mirrors that line one wall of Holmes's gym, reflecting back to him not only his technical acumen but also the more intangible qualities of will and resolve that add up to a fighting self. In addition to running, hitting the bags, and sparring, Holmes readied himself for a fight by looking in the mirror provided by his corner.

Even the gym's greenest novices, to the extent they absorbed and reflected back Holmesian principles, could help the master prepare himself. Once, at the end of an afternoon training session, as the last fighters packed up and left, Russell found himself standing next to Holmes, who turned to him and said,



A fighter hammers his coach's boxing mitts, East Oakland Boxing Gym.



"How's my jab look to you? Still strong? I still got it?" The short answer was *Yes.* The long answer was *Yes, your form is still perfect and it's still an all-time great jab, but you don't throw it with the speed you once had, and you throw it many fewer times per round than you used to, and sometimes you don't react in time to an opportunity to throw it.* Russell gave him the short answer.

If Holmes did not think Futch and Arcel had anything to teach him back when he was thirty-two – and since then he had accumulated the better part of a decade and a half of additional experience – then he could not expect a college boy with exactly one amateur fight to his credit to offer a useful critique of his jab. So what was Holmes saying? Maybe it was *I know I'm old, but I think I have enough left to win one more title. You've been around the gym, you've seen me train, you know my style and you've seen the top heavyweights out there. You know I can do it if things break my way.* Or maybe Holmes was saying *Are you paying attention and learning anything while you're here? This is the best jab you'll ever be this close to. Study it.* Or maybe he was just saying *Mirror, mirror . . .*

Mirror, mirror works the other way, too: a gym's most celebrated fighter also serves as its most polished reflecting surface. The lesser fighters who trained next to and against Holmes, keeping an eye on him even when they jumped rope or ran on the treadmill, made him a mirror in which they could see their ideal selves in action. They looked to his example, the best available embodiment of fistic virtue, when they wanted to imagine themselves mastering technique, achieving more perfect discipline, moving more confidently in a world of hurt. *When I'm better at that,* the lesser fighter could say to himself, *I'll be more like Larry, but I'll still be the same me I see in the mirror every day.*

Sometimes the pressure of a fight can force this mostly unconscious internal monologue into plain view. Take, for instance, the matter of Holmes's jump jab, an esoteric move that turns up tellingly in the repertoire of other

fighters who train at his gym. Throwing a jump jab, Holmes leaves his feet entirely, in profile to his opponent, legs together and torso bent toward the target as he snaps a hard punch from the shoulder. There is no leg drive, so it is not a crushing blow, and it is riskier than throwing a regular jab, since he takes longer to return to defensive posture, but the very confidence of the move tends to dishearten the other guy. The jump jab says *I'm flying, my arm is a thunderbolt, here I come from the sky.* Holmes only uses it when he is deep in the rhythm of a round, usually in a training session, occasionally in an actual fight, and he rarely uses it in more than one round. Its appearance indicates that he feels himself to have established command, that he can land a punch whenever he wants. Suddenly it seems to the opponent that no matter what he tries to do, he finds himself walking into yet another perfectly timed and aimed blow. Holmes does not give in to exuberance and overuse the jump jab; having thrown two or three to show he is in charge, he puts the move away in his toolbox and gets back to throwing regular jabs and one-twos.

The sense of command implicit in Holmes's jump jab is so strong that it rubs off on other fighters, who take it with them when they leave the gym. Once I saw Richie Lovell, the son of Holmes's business manager at the time, land a series of recognizably Holmesian jump jabs in the second round of a four-round bout with a squat, hirsute guy named Eduardo Rolon. Lovell had been emulating Holmes in fine style, nullifying Rolon's uncomplicated attack with footwork and parries, jabbing, crossing off the jab, circling and moving. Holmes, the master and model himself, yelled instructions from his ringside seat.

Lovell threw the jump jabs in the second round, as if to celebrate the fact that he was boxing so well and to place a stylistic cherry atop his imminent victory, but then, curiously, all the fight seemed to drain out of him. He began acting as if, having already won the bout, he would be satisfied to just get through the mere formality of the rest of it. He spent the third and fourth rounds moving more and fighting less, eventually abandoning offense altogether and just bouncing off the ropes to clinch. Rolon, fighting in his hometown, kept moving forward and punching, and the judges awarded him a victory by split decision. Lovell deserved no worse than a draw, but he could not complain: he had made possible the bad decision by fighting so poorly in the last two rounds.

Lovell forgot – or never learned – that the jump jab and the mastery associated with it are two separate things that only appeared to be inseparable when he watched Holmes throw the punch. Holmes concludes that he is in command when he sees that his opponent has been worn down by an accrued beating – outboxed and frustrated, yes, but also tired, addled, and hurt, and therefore unlikely to produce a late-round surge. Lovell had not beaten his man – he had just boxed better – so Rolon still had the wherewithal to exhibit just enough sustained aggression to give two judges an excuse to award him the fight.

Now Art Baylis, one of Holmes's sparring partners, had watched Holmes throw jump jabs at other men, as Lovell had, but Baylis had also been hit by Holmes with enough jump jabs in the gym over the years to inscribe the move's import on his very flesh and bones. Once I saw Baylis throw a couple of jump jabs of his own in a fight, seemingly out of sheer joy, just at the moment when it became plain to all that he was going to win. Baylis, a small heavyweight who also fought as a cruiserweight, appeared to swell with power when he threw the jump jabs, as if expanding to conform to the ideal embodied by his boss. His opponent seemed to shrivel up, acquiescing. Holmes, watching from ringside, nodded and smiled, like a man pleased with what he sees in the mirror.

Right: reflection in a smudged mirror, Wild Card Boxing Gym, Los Angeles.