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MECHANICAL PARTS

by

Kyle William McGinn

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Artist Statement

Poetry, like music, is full of accents and familiar timbre. After a time, a poet’s work can be recognized the way the first few notes of a favorite song resonant as distinctly belonging to that artist. This phenomenon makes finding a new poem that steps outside of the familiar tones or voice of a poet’s body of work that much more exciting—like hearing a favorite artist add a new instrument or genre element to a song. Ultimately, readers can recognize the poet’s voice because that’s the comfortable range—familiar notes where the voice feels best. Still, the best songs push vocal ranges; this is another feature of both poetry and music, as the best poems test the edges or the line.

For *Mechanical Parts*, I found myself in a specific and distinct kind of mode. Early on, I printed the body of work I’ve produced since starting at Hamline and found something troubling. My poems—to continue the song analogy—were all

dwelling the same key, using the same chords, clocking in at the easy three-and-a-half minute mark. Isolated, the single poem looks attractive and I am more than happy to claim it as mine. Seeing some seventy-odd poems laid out side-by-side with a confluence of unrhyming couplets and tercets, roaming around the seven to twelve syllable per line range, was disheartening—a visual testament to a lack of range. I think of this as a sign of bad habits, so I read.

I'm not a tremendous Whitman fan. Walt is a blast on the first day of spring or after reading some especially dark and dreary prose, but I would never think of Whitman as a significant influence on my writing. Because of our differences, I think that revisiting “Song of Myself” and “Leaves of Grass” proved to be fruitful. If Whitman can get away with rambling on for twenty pages, I can certainly stand to produce a sustained page and a half of poetry. Still, writing long poems with more than a minimal amount of “telling” has always proven fairly difficult for me. I think in reading Whitman and revisiting Carl Adamshick’s *Saint Friend* as well as Martin Espada’s *The Republic of Poetry*, I took away a number of techniques to sustain longer verse, namely developing a willingness to “get in the speaker’s head” a bit and tell emotive details rather than try to find a way to show them through an image or action. As of now, “Medicine City: The Road” is my longest poem. I can definitely see a level of strain within that piece, but I’m certainly glad to have tried extending my breath.

In light of trying for the long poem, I also wanted to play with this concept of extending—stretching the topic as far as I could. Normally, I approach that by writing “end to end” with a subject, as with the “Undisputed” collection. In those poems, the

pieces read individually, but clearly belong to the same category—a kind of “best of” subject collection. For the Medicine City poems, I decided to try to push myself by embracing parts over the whole. As an undergraduate, I was told my fiction tended toward “slice of life” stories (which, admittedly, isn’t the most complementary critique), and I think that stuck with me in an interesting way. For Medicine City, I thought of containing the slices to slivers—tiny moments between appointments and exams. Maybe the best analogy is a low-budget television show, where all of the on screen work is in reference and reaction to the big moments that happen off camera. The viewer only sees the personal and human attempts to adjust or pick up the pieces. I find that kind of action far more interesting.

My hope is that poems like “Causeway” and “Subway” do the heavy lifting in a world that is slightly off-center. I didn’t quite embrace the idea of a dystopian Rochester and that’s mostly because I felt that the reality of patient care at the Mayo Clinic is strange enough. Everything is sterile and service based and provided to patients with a pitiful smile. With that in mind, I tried to lean in to the alienation and automation that’s become such a staple of health care. Stylistically and in terms of voice, Medicine City was a bit of a push for me, but one that I hope paid off in its sparseness.

Discomfort can present in many different forms, but I think the discomfort of subject is sometimes overlooked. When a writer faces a difficult subject, sometimes they get a pass for trying—for being brave in writing at the subject. I don’t disagree, but sometimes I find myself frustrated that the more autobiographical works seem to suffer from the criticism of “sorry you had to go through that—glad you could share”

and not “you writing this out, and doing it well, is impressive.” The cancer poems (as I’ve taken to calling them), weren’t actually hard to write; rather, I felt compelled to write them. Truthfully, there was a time I couldn’t write about anything else. In revisiting them for *Mechanical Parts*, I read a lot of Max Ritvo and Tess Gallagher. I found the seemingly effortless ways Max’s poems appear on the page as both a comfort and a challenge. “Dawn of Man,” a particular favorite of mine, manages to be both dark and light, both apparently about cancer and illness and not. The last lines are stunning:

I’m told to set myself goals. But my mind
doesn’t work that way. I, instead, have wishes

for myself. Wishes aren’t afraid
to take on their own color and life —

like a boy who takes a razor from a high cabinet
puffs out his cheeks and strips them bloody.

I’m not sure I’ve quite reached that level of balance, but I certainly wanted the cancer poems to be both about cancer and not. More than anything, I wanted the cancer poems to be about living—even if the living at the moment of the poem was sometimes pathetic or funny or just kind of normal.

Tess Gallagher’s collection *Dear Ghosts* treads much of the same water that Ritvo’s work does (Gallagher wrote at her cancer too), but she also isn’t afraid to view her personal cancer in the same realm as other human tragedy. I think by surrounding a personal calamity with broader injustice and pain, she manages to give her cancer poems some serious gravity without seeming melodramatic or over the top. I wanted the same for my poetry, and also for the cancer poems to have the same

kind of lightness her work has. For instance, Gallagher opens *Dear Ghosts* with “My Unopened Life,” a poem that still fucks me up to this day:

My Unopened Life

lay to the right of my plate
like a spoon squiring a knife, waiting
patiently for soup or the short destiny
of dessert at the eternal picnic—unsheltered
picnic at the mouth of the sea
that dares everything forgotten to huddle
at the periphery of a checked cloth spread
under the shadowy, gnarled penumbra
of the madrona.

Hadn't I done well enough with the life
I'd seized, sure as a cat with
its mouthful of bird, bird with its
belly full of worms, worm like an acrobat of darkness
keeping its moist nose to the earth, soaring
perpetually into darkness without so much as
the obvious question: why all this darkness?
And even in the bell of the bird: *why*
only darkness?

The bowl of the spoon
collects entire rooms just lying there next
to the knife. It makes brief forays into
the mouth delivering cargoes of ceilings
and convex portraits of teeth
posing as stalactites of
a serially extinguished cave

from whence we do nothing but stare out
at the sea collecting little cave-ins of
perception sketched on the moment
to make more tender the house of the suicide
in which everything was so exactly
where it had been left by someone missing.
Nothing, not even the spoon he abandoned
near the tea cup, could be moved without
seemingly altering the delicious
universe of his intention.

So are we each lit briefly by engulfments
of space like the worm in the beak of
the bird, yielding to sudden corridors
of light-into-light, never asking: *why*
tell me why
all this light?

I'm including the whole poem because I think it's important that poets not only name drop the poets they like, but they should also share the poetry that in turn helps write their poems. I want to write a cancer poem like Gallagher's poem (which may not even be about her cancer), but find it in my voice.

The benefit of writing poems about illness is that it seems to open form up in unexpected ways. I believe that's due to illness often being so unexpected and such a foreign experience. In a sense, the poetry demands to reflect the surreal nature of a diagnosis. Sometimes the energy required to do simple things while sick demands a lot of breath. Subsequently, the poems tend to open up. Conversely, the opposite is true, concentration demands concentrated poems, small and tight lined.

One of my largest takeaways from this past year of writing is the idea of joy. As a younger poet, I think I operated in that dumb, angsty mindset that poetry should feel and sound like Morrissey lyrics. I'm not sure if it's age or experience (or maybe I'm just starting to catch up with everyone else), but a dirge just doesn't appeal to me anymore. I come back to one poem again and again, "I allow myself" by Dorothea Grossman:

I allow myself
the luxury of breakfast
(I am no nun, for Christ's sake).
Charmed as I am
by the sputter of bacon,

and the eye-opening properties
of eggs,
it's the coffee
that's really sacramental.
In the old days,
I spread fires and floods and pestilence
on my toast.
Nowadays, I'm more selective,
I only read my horoscope
by the quiet glow of the marmalade.

I can't remember when I first read it, but some of those lines (*I am no nun, for Christ's sake* and *the quiet glow of the marmalade*) grab at me in such a warm and fierce way. Even re-reading it now, I can feel my eye watering as if I were swelling up with goodness. I find that to be an incredible way to affect a reader, and I've been trying to write more poems in that vein. It's a funny epiphany to realize that good poetry can make you mutter "fuuuuuuuuck" to yourself in so many different ways. "Some Light" and "June 21st" may be those poems for me right now, but, if anything, writing this collection has proven that poetry can and should be bursting with joy occasionally.

Upon completing my first drafts, I was certain that the "cancer poems" were the meat of this collection. Now, I've come around to the idea that it's actually "Undisputed" that's doing the most work, mostly because it's clear that I love the subject and that love bleeds into other sections. On some level it's a bit embarrassing to love a thing like boxing. To my mind, it's no different than nerding out over fantasy novels or science fiction, as much of boxing lore is pure mythology (ask any fighting fan and they'll claim Ali hardly ever got punched. This is objectively false). So much of the themes and elements surrounding boxing are pervasive in the other

mini collections. There are these big, grandiose themes of triumph and victory and adulation present in the work, but also failure and heartbreak and injustice. I was surprised to find such classic motifs coming across every page, especially when they culminated in a classic “Hollywood” finish of not-quite-a-win (ala Rocky and Raging Bull). But, I’ve come around to the idea that a close loss is a better story than a triumphant win. I think of this Joyce Carol Oates poem all of the time (my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Jennifer Brantley, gave it to me out of the blue one day and it’s the best goddamn gift I’ve ever gotten):

Undefeated Heavyweight, 20 Years Old

I

Never been hurt! Never
knocked down! or staggered or
stunned or made to know there’s a blow
to kill not his own!—therefore the soul
glittering like jewels worn
on the outside of the body.

II

A boy with a death’s-head mask dealing hurt
in an arc of six short inches. Unlike ours
his flesh recalls its godhead, if dimly. Unlike
us he knows he will live forever.

The walloping sounds of his body blows are iron
striking bone.

The joy he promises is a fist of breaking bone.
For whose soul is so bright, so burnished,
so naked in display?

All insult, says this death’s-head—ancient, tribal,
last week’s on the street—in redeemed in the taste
of another’s blood.

You don’t know. But you know.

Again, here's Oates writing at the dark side of sport with pure joy. I think I've taken more from this particular poem than most when finding the structure and tone of the collection as a whole.

Initially, I was attached to the prospect of sections within my thesis; however, after discussing the sections with Professor Vandenberg, I think I'm best without them. To break myself of the section habit, I looked to *Saint Friend* by Carl Adamshick, *Dear Ghosts* by Tess Gallagher, and *The Republic of Poetry* by Martin Espada. All three works tend to use longer poems and often some sectioning, but they all have a cohesive quality despite some of the poems being far removed from their neighbors. I also don't know that sections are appealing to the reader as much as I'd like to think. The apollonian self tends to push for neat, clean lines delineating one poetic topic from the next, but, in truth, there's already so much crossover between movements. Initially, I felt that my boxing poems and my cancer poems could not coexist—that they were too dichotomous and the idea of a healthy athlete squaring off with a cancer patient on the page would be too obtuse. But, upon blending the batch within the thesis, I see that more often than not there are invisible threads pulling some unlikely poems closer and some at first glance similar poems apart. As a poet so moved by subject, I'm hoping that the thesis process will open up a new field of vision for me, one in which I can spot those nebulous or thin connections between works that actually prove stronger once held to the light.

I think the most lasting lesson I've come away with during this thesis process is that I will have to learn with always wanting to go bigger and do more with my poetry. This collection started out at roughly 90 pages, considerably longer than most

poetry books, yet it felt as if I only produced a half of the subjects and characters within the poems. I'm still not sure how to temper that reaction or how to be ok with not having enough in a literary sense, but it's a lesson I'm glad to have learned now. Eventually, I cut an entire section upon realizing it was its own work and cut and added a few poems here and there. Lately, I've been reading more and more actual poetry books cover to cover (and not jumping around like I usually do), and in doing so I've realized that many poets seem to be struggling with the same impulse to flesh out more and more. The real trick seems to be in proper restraint—what kind of discipline will best serve the poetry. Some do it better than others, but it's really something to take in when it works.

I've spent a lot of time reflecting on my poetry—especially the work I produced before creating this collection. One critique always stuck with me from my earlier work. My editor for my first chapbook, *Pennies*, once told me my poetry is hyper-masculine—full of guys doing “guy things.” I'm not sure that's changed much (the obvious point being that my mother hardly shows up in my poetry), but since then I've committed to evaluating who I read and what I take away from their work. I've always read more female poets than male poets, but for some reason I often cited male poets first. James Wright, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Major Jackson always made the top of the list when asked who my biggest influences were, yet I was always walking around with Ruth Stone, Dorothea Lasky, and Rita Dove poems on hand. Lately, I've been more and more aware of this problem—citing the wrong thing (not that Wright and Jackson are the wrong poets, just that they clearly aren't my biggest influences).

I don't know that I'll ever write anything other than hyper-masculine "guy things" poetry, but I'm trying to insert more nods and homages to the poets—specifically the women—who have shaped who I am as a poet. That's probably the critical takeaway from this writing process. It's not enough to produce; the production has to honor work that allowed its existence. So, with that in mind, I think my biggest hope for this collection is for the Undisputed to honor Joyce Carol Oates as much as they honor Sugar Ray Robinson, for the cancer poems to honor Tess Gallagher as much as they honor cancer patients, for the Medicine City poems to honor Margaret Atwood as much as they honor the dystopic world of Rochester, and for the collection as a whole to honor the poets I've been lucky enough to work with personally, Dr. Jennifer Brantley, Professor Deborah Keenan, and Professor Katrina Vandenberg.

CONTENTS

Diagnosis	1
Undisputed: Pugilism.....	2
My Car Goes.....	3
Medicine City: Destination Medical Center	4
Driving Lessons	5
Medicine City: The Road	6
The Waiting Room.....	8
Treatment Recipe	9
Medicine City: Food	10
Eat	11
Eat II.....	12
Eat III	13
Undisputed: Taking a Dive	14
Feast	15
Eleven A.M.....	16
Night Windows	17
Meeting Minutes	18
Undisputed: Rice Street Rocker	19
Insides	20
Undisputed: what's This Season?.....	21
Undisputed: B.T. Bombers.....	22
Titles.....	23
Undisputed: False Idols.....	24
Medicine City: Theater.....	25
Super Senior	26
Infusion.....	27
Longways	28
Medicine City: Gonda	28
Scars	30
Medicine City: Causeway.....	31
Undisputed: Untouchable.....	32
“Man”	33
Medicine City: Room 427 (Traumatic Brain Injury)	34
Medicine City: Room 202 (Dementia)	35
Medicine City: Room 471 (Traumatic Brain Injury)	36

Undisputed: The Long Count	37
Recovery	38
Recovery II.....	39
Undisputed: Manslaughter.....	40
It Is Human Nature	41
We Were All Aware	42
Medicine City: Subway.....	43
Undisputed: Sonny Liston as a Metaphor.....	44
Forgetting The Engagement (Chemo Brain)	45
Stitches.....	46
Undisputed: Undefeated	47
Ho(c)key	48
Undisputed: Manos de Piedra	49
The Door Open So We Could	50
Diagnosis II.....	51
Fog That Glass	52
Eulogy for a Spouse: Cancer Suicide	53
June 21 st	54
Still life of a Folded Orange Peel	55
Undisputed: On the Ropes (Glassjaw)	56
Undisputed: Sugar.....	57
Some Light.....	58
The End of the Appointment.....	59
The Light This Morning.....	60

DIAGNOSIS

Round cheeked nurse leans in
to take my vitals. I smell cigarettes,

lilacs. Hear the hum of the blood pressure
machine pinching my arm. Take in flowers and ash to keep

myself from clinging to her scrubs, asking her
to sit on the edge of my bed. I drift into that warm

bath of hospital sounds: beeping monitors, the low
hush of so much waiting. I dream she sits, sighs

and rubs her finger, blushes when I notice
ring tan, gaps in the color, looks at her fingertips

while her voice gets low, tired when she tells me
how long it takes for the burning to fade. It's too much.

Smoke and flowers. Suddenly, I'm awake.
The grip on my bicep gasps down my forearm. I try

to lay back without gasping too. Fall asleep, dream
of cigarettes and lilacs—where we will go when this is all over.

UNDISPUTEDS: PUGILISM

is an old way
of working
 joints and hinges.
Here, kinetic
 snap of fist on orbital—
elliptical arc
 of long hooks
winding further and further
out. Pretend:

showy shadow
 boxing, deft
 movement—no
real contact. No
one truly takes
those hits, do they?

MY CAR GOES

Chicago—my wife, carsick
in the passenger seat, taking
in cold blasting from the AC.

My side splitting at the rib,
bad liver at the Illinois Oasis
station. I taste copper

when I spit through the open
window. She groans
when I contort myself sideways

against the gas pedal,
skip through static
onto warbling stations.

Shotgun through Kenosha:
all of West Lake Michigan.
4 A.M. Milwaukee and more

driving. Imagine us hovering,
suspended above wet asphalt,
careening toward home

where, in a matter of days,
I will collapse beside
our bed, set it all in motion.

For now, I want to peel
the skin off of my ribs. Let her
sleep while the sun breaks.

MEDICINE CITY: DESTINATION MEDICAL CENTER

South fork of the river, a kink
in the waterway, lined with
tall buildings. Exam rooms
stacked on exam rooms. A thousand
ways to deliver news:

his fingertips held stately,
steeped with indexes
to his lips, tired, familiar
sighs, the automatic
absent bobs, her hands
squeezed, then permission
to leave the room. *What
are our options?*

Strange hotels, modified
apartment buildings
where the family congregates,
game plans. *We'll fight it.*
always, as if diagnoses
were made on battle lines

or the glint of Medicine City light
off the churning water
by the oxbow. Swimming
upstream, against the current.

DRIVING LESSONS

The trick, my dad says
is to think of driver and passenger
as straddling the middle of the road, sharing
the burden of asphalt or concrete
—dirt. Consider the material make-up.

I'm slightly right, hugging
the shoulder, imagining myself seated
center in the car. Line of trees, North
Woods filing by like a flip book

and then a crest of pines in the median,
sudden patch of forest. Dad says
you must be tired. Offers to take
the wheel. All these long drives
with my father, suddenly

we're commanding
equal portions of road, counterweighted
over the crown—that bend
guiding us to one side or the other.

MEDICINE CITY: THE ROAD

American arteries, bulging lanes across the flyover states. Crowned with sloping concrete, asphalt, tar allowing the run off to collect among the ditches

on into the negative space between towns and cities. Eisenhower, father of the Interstate lines, tying old rail to river town to factory docks

—moving parts, a great crawl over the prairie. “Rust Belt” too, forged along great lakes and river valleys. Working title,

meaning occupation for occupants. Company towns produce production, producing until waterlogged and windowless. That familiar migration: our get-up-and-go

industries stabbing westward at the wide navel of America, fertile crescent of the West, gracing our tumbling highways with row on row, distinctly American. American, a

wholly Americana dreamscape—all furrowed brows and west facing eyes, a migrant mother. New half of the last century—beginning ’56—small movement, borders defined, novel

regional exchange. Hand on machine on hand through the plains: hand on earth on hand. Notice this in an instant passing on the highway: little girl in a plain dress

off the exit ramp, delicate in the way she collects the wretched refuse of these teeming roads—delicate in the way she tends to the nothing between towns. Some say a forgotten space

—forever linked to the shared memory of blast furnaces and iron mines in the middle west—this is a place of remembering, of transitions, of four-way stops replaced

by highway and frontage road, over pass, suddenly now clover-leafed. The atrophied America, mom-and-pop gas stop bare shelved and wrecked by a simple reroute. Rerouted

and detoured past the box churches and one light drags. Gazing past the shoulder, one might notice the shiny new clinic, the mother dressed in scrubs, the places we all work now. Hypnotic middle west, birthing

new industry. Commerce mechanization, assembly line of air
in lungs, blood to appendages until blue
gray with mechanical failure. A strange new American incision

set to remove the antiquated means we're producing. Service
in all capacities, the new slogan, famous Midwestern hospital-
ity. By not building, we can serve with the heart moving blood

currency to the lungs, to the liver, to the useless appendixes. The great churning
joints of the bright and metallic upper middle west grinding
bone on bone—ligament gaps between vitals

bypassed as if struckthrough with four-lanes
all bending their arms
to Medicine City

THE WAITING ROOM

In the waiting room, a woman in tall
boots sits across the aisle. I feel her

look into me and see all that's growing
there. And then there's shame

—her tearing into a magazine. I want to lean
over the aisle—see if I can grab hold and pull

out the bad parts. Say, *I'm so sorry for everything*. I want
to show her how they'll pump medicine through her, let her feel

the breathlessness that comes when the needle goes in
to her chest—the hush when the clips are taped down.

And this is where it starts. Long wait with old
magazines. Realize there's too much she already knows

TREATMENT RECIPE

Set those six months to boil
taking care to stir the treatment
until soft. The body should be waterlogged.
Knead what's metastasized until dry to touch;
splice the summer vertically, sealing
off leaky nodes with titanium clips.
Complicate the surgery, then drain
out the autumn, let the body fray.

MEDICINE CITY: FOOD

Wayward cafeteria, convergence of subway and skylight.
Light pouring in from the north window, sanitary.
Sanitary accoutrements: hair net, surgical mask, gloves—always
latex free. Free: living on either side of the sneeze guard

where we're all doing work. Work our way through
the queue. Cue a coughing fit and familiar hand
held out, to keep them (or anyone) at bay, waiting.
Waiting on each one of us, patient. Patient and worker

slogging through endless lines at lunch rush. Rush
from food to waiting room where we'll idle. Idol,
the great Mayo, beacon of Midwestern success.
Success when we sit, four to a room: doctor

and doctor, wife and man. Man, ready with that joke
when the diagnosis comes. Comes for the treatment,
stays for the food. Food, we barely keep down after
twisting through these lines, waiting. Waiting.

EAT

Angry at the body, I go for the ice cream.
Allow the cold to settle in, harden in the stomach.
First week: face the swirling numbers.
Oncology nurse clicks her tongue, spreads

a wet echo through the ward. Ten pounds
in one week: too much loss. *This is a changed
body*, she says. Step off and watch the numbers
flutter down to zero.

Oncologist says *you need to eat. Keep it down
or you won't make it through the third cycle.*
I cut out the California Health Food, throw away
the "Eat Cancer to Death" books, make peace

with the drive through. I need to make weight.
Eat cheeseburgers and ice cream. Calories?
Calories. I choke one down at breakfast
and deflate into the passenger seat,

my dad rumbling the Suburban
into the hospital ramp. I can tell
he's dismayed when I toss open
the door and throw up until empty.

EAT II

My incision leaks
over the 4th of July

My father drives me
to our family physician

They weigh me, tell me
that I've lost weight

thirty pounds in a week
and my dad clenches

the hinge of his jaw hard lined
while they talk about diet

restrictions and the way a body
might eat itself.

EAT III

Assorted boxes: hundreds of tissues
and ginger. The backwards way of appetite

during treatment (betrayal in
the esophagus. It all comes back up).

Strange to miss
the physical nature of eating, cancer

nubbing any churning of jaw, wet
lips. Sacramental filling

of empty space. Instead, a dull
echo reverberating in my inner ear.

The suggestion and honoring of duty:
eat this and you may live.

UNDISPUTEDS: TAKING A DIVEⁱ

Liston vs. Ali I: burning eyes,
the balm on your gloves.
What did you know, Sonny?

This is a dirty game,
sometimes. Easier to stay down.
Where did you go, Sonny?

Liston vs. Ali II: phantom or anchor,
Jersey Joe gave you an hour.
Who did you owe, Sonny?

Your wife, Geraldine
found you and three days of rot.
What did you know, Sonny?

FEAST

Rolling chop, yellow onions on red cutting board. Oil popping behind me.
Familiar smells, but the quiet of cooking separates this moment from nostalgia—

those years spent in a backdoor galley, food dropped, down, plated. Cigarettes
and seasoning until kitchen close. Then, a post at the door, stinking like bar food

and degreaser—a different comfort than the kitchen at home now. There was a
soothing
rhythm of moving bar job to bar job. Kitchen to door to behind the bar.

Sometimes it's startling to look at a body and see the ways it moves
from station to station. Rolling chop, I nick my knuckle and suddenly

I'm chopping onions, like this crooked finger belongs to an alley
in River Falls, another night posted at the door when I got my fingers

boot stomped by a straggler after bar close. Apply pressure to the cut
not far from that bend in my index. Look to my wrist and remember graduating

from bar gigs to hospitals. TBI and psych wards, a collection of sharps confiscated
off patients, tucked in a corner of a locker in the office. Edges somehow finer

than the knife I cut myself with. Two short scars from that first month, getting caught
with a broken faucet head. The bleeding stops and I finish the food, plate and eat

fast out of habit. Think of that worst night while washing up, drunk boys outside
of the bar. The ease in which a man can get stuck, spill out into the street.

ELEVEN A.M.

The domesticity of blue arm chairs.
She's nude near the window sill, hands clasped
as if pleading with the exterior
to bleed through the parting drapes.

This is the winter six years ago:
negative space where gray sun
bends around black tree limbs,
another blessing from the season.
He is chain smoking on her bed,
ashtray plopped upon his belly—the rise
and fall of smoke and glass. She strikes
warrior pose, long exhale framed
by the window. The light
is made of parts that are
not her.

Her not tibia.

Her not ulna.

Her not breast.

Her not clavicle.

Shining, raucous gray glow. A breath
held in, lungs waiting to blossom.

NIGHT WINDOWS

Here is a gentle architecture:
the slope at the corner,
round edges brought wide
as if crescendoing the perpendicular
only to settle into the quiet
rhythm of parallels. Tall windows
and the soft things inside:
bellowing radiators
limping ceiling fans
sputtering stovetops

No, they would be working,
the solitary churning
of mechanical parts.

MEETING MINUTES

Big sighs get to me most.
Once, a lead organizer told me

This is a Labor moment. It's always been
a labor moment—a time for work.

I'm searching for the convenient metaphor
—*all in favor, say I.* All the remembering

of short turnarounds or hard corners,
supervisors leering, suddenly towering

in the breakroom. Modern trades:
waking life for wages.

Open for discussion: strange configuration,
a round table with motion.

UNDISPUTEDS: RICE STREET ROCKERⁱⁱ

“a good union job”
Evan pulls out his union card
as if I need verification
that he’s one of my kind

big, broken teeth smile
he can’t help but grin through
that big scar running from temple
to upper lip as if his head

might split in two
he boxed 84-90
says he knew Mike
and I pause at the name

because no one calls
him Mike he’s the
Rice Street Rocker
fought like he was straight

out of a Mickey Spillane
rag but I guess Evan’s
that way too it fits
well all these kids

from the same neighborhood
with lacerated faces
growing up good natured
and no longer hungry

in that way that comes
out in the ring sudden
rush and it passes settles
into simple things kids and

a good union job

INSIDES

MRI tech
with short hair
behind glass

she lays me
face up
asking me to

hold there
she smiles
don't worry

inside of me
that's what hurts
along my ribs

but I manage
a gulp of air
long enough

thin brunette
steps
and then

in a tube
I hear her
breathe in

I can't
says
she's only looking

for a moment
the pressure building
is almost too much

to hold
inside
without bursting

UNDISPUTEDS: WHAT'S THIS SEASON?

When low light and salt puddles in the garage
move me to remove—strip parts, the elementals. Ice
melt beneath a 40 watt, slight electric whine

humming while the heavy bag creaks, swaying
from its rest on joint and beam. My one
car garage in winter: intimacy—knuckles flaking

off, blood and bone against polyvinyl
—deconstructing joint and socket. Younger,
this might have been progress:

degrading my material for future strength.
Now, habit—a slow decline. Inspect the skeletal
body: minor, barely working

parts corroding with each
labored swing.
Fracture upon contact.

UNDISPUTEDS: B.T. BOMBERS

Talking Mayweather
 v. Pacquiao
 before bar close.
 Roy mimes
 philly
 shell defense. Calls
 a winner early
 in the decade.

This is years before
 the Floyd/Manny fight.
 Clean mist
 beneath the orange
 glow of neon, dragging
 on roll-your-owns.
 Roy was with B.T. Bombers
 years ago, 15-year-old
 welterweight. Thinks
 he remembers me
 from a bout at the armory.

I know this
 can't be. But, we speak
 the same
 language. Secret tongue
 of cut brows and creaking
 ribs. The busted knuckles
 lit up like a sign.

TITLES

Worst part:
the moment after
introductions
when I wince
and off handedly
refer to myself
as a patient.

Use cancer
with a big "C."
Then it's sunken
eyes and pity
as if I become
more broken,
chipped along
the lip of
my glass—
cut everyone
along the
tenderest parts.

UNDISPUTEDS: FALSE IDOLSⁱⁱⁱ

On Spring Garden
up 72 steps
stands a man
cast in bronze.
The pride of Philadelphia,
a boxer, hands up
and victorious.

Philly, we need to talk:
1) Rocky Balboa is fictional
2) Joe Frazier is real
3) Really real

Frazier, true working man,
put in twelve hour shifts at six
years old. Short and slow,
his punch is made of steam
that comes off the men
(like his father) working in
the meat packing warehouses.

Philly, put down the popcorn
and quit humming “Gonna Fly Now.”
There’s an insult cast in bronze
at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Frazier, undisputed champ,
ran those 72 steps
well before Rocky.
Yet, his legacy is this:
“Down goes Frazier.”

MEDICINE CITY: THEATER

This fluorescent sun, rising off
the marquee. Vaudeville,
once. And positively
mediaeval set dressing, but all blue

walls. Curves, rounding
into ceiling. This was art,
once. Chain bookstore now
(for a time, at least) with patients

scanning the shelves between
appointments. Big display
with the Mayo Diet shown
center, bright white and smiling

cover of health. Eat this. Eat.

Hours before the next scan,
we thumb through the magazine
displays. An article says *beat cancer*

with fruit! I rub the port in my chest,
imagine the direct line to artery. How this
is all a version of acting.

For a time, us patients play our parts,
grinning through wilting hair. Our one
or two classics, loaded

for the audience. Butts in the seats.

SUPER SENIOR

Lost my eyebrows
the last week
of my last semester.

Tell-tale sign
of months
of poison at work.

I get used
to a new identity.
I'm suddenly

the super senior
in a mask—Batman
sans the Bruce.

Still outfitted between
fights. Masked
in the coffee queue

or taking notes before
the exam. It's funny—costume
sealed, over-ripened for the final.

INFUSION

Oncology nurse draws
blood. See it red
and muddy. She says
I bleed well. I smell
saline on my breath, taste
odd metal and stale cells.
Wanted to tear
the seams along my chest.

Oncology nurse draws
out her “O’s” with a thick
accent. They catch
in her throat, gargle
weighted and warbly,
as if to say she’s sorry—
as if anything
could be done about this.

LONGWAYS

imagining my wife	waking, the phone ringing
too early and	there's half sleep, surprised
when I say	that they've found
<i>cancer</i>	<i>cancer</i>
short against my teeth	in the ER
she's grimacing	<i>I'm sorry</i>
I say it too much	as if trying
to fill	the wide spaces
that fracture	longways

MEDICINE CITY: GONDA

cavernous. interior. goldlit.
subwindow. piano. volunteered.
folksong. youaremysunshine. fastwalk.
blooddraw. singing. shouting.
intercom. names. handshakes.
slowwalk. youaredying. lobbysleep.
waitingroomsleep. singing. shouting.
hollow. chandelier. exam.
handshakes. tears. carsleep.

SCARS

My wife coaxes me
into lifting my shirt
and showing the dining
room all eighteen inches
of scar along
my stomach.

Smile big
when someone says
Holy shit.

Sometimes, I want
to ham it up
in these moments.
Backslap with a big drink,
compare scars
like Robert Shaw

*I got that beat.
I'll drink to your cancer.
And I'll drink to yours.*

MEDICINE CITY: CAUSEWAY

Spoons now spoonrings. Vendor

slides one on her finger. Ignores

the wristband and the needles. Pokes

his head over the table. Bandshell

blaring bluegrass. Polka

too in the square and about this ring. Hand

made, one-of-a-kind like you. Tuned

wrong, banjo strumming wildly.

Bouncing

off the tall buildings.

Beautiful

day with patients milling

in the square

UNDISPUTEDS: UNTOUCHABLE^{iv}

Nobody can hit Willie Pep,
 hunched with mashed face,
 giving grace
 to the featherweight. Still,

 there's svelte twitches—
 willowy bends
 at waist
 and neck.

Nobody touches
 Willie Pep,
 educated feet, poetry
 and rhythm, syncopated
 bobs and weaves.
 You couldn't hit him
 in the ass
 with a handful
 of rice.

Willie Pep spins and parries,
 pirouettes, gloves dangling

 Willie Pep wins rounds
 without ever throwing
 a punch,
 just ducks
 and slips
 as if bathed in baby oil
 Untouchable

Willie Pep
 loses 11 and only goes
 down in six.
 Fights 241.

“MAN”

At home, my wife twists the fine ends
of my hair between her fingertips, says
she misses my curls. She’s been researching
invitro fertilization.

The workshop is dismayed,
your hypermasculinity is problematic.
The ways in which I’m presenting
myself: my beard, my low brow

furrowed. The truth: I’m afraid to die,
to be that naked again. Those months
with poison pumping into me,
deading my hair, my nails, my spit.

Hemingway is long dead. I keep
cancer as a secret, as if an inside
joke. We will laugh at all the ways
it shucked her and I of ourselves.

I am compensating. There are invisible strings
plucked in the O.R.—a nerve
touched wrongly, death of all cells, function.
Those basic entanglings, suddenly complex

under the weight of what can’t happen. She
says I touch her different now, a cloak of
hesitancy—the distance of a changed
anatomy. Quiet things that the workshop

doesn’t know. The ways in which we construct
us—our paper thin shelters. Hyper-
masculinity. Contentedly nauseous, a strange
aching. It’s too close to that spring.

MEDICINE CITY: ROOM 427 (TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY)

Vague,

microfiched syllables

rattling around, tripping on his teeth
and lips while the nurse

disrobes him.

His grown son sitting in the corner.

Orange glow falls through the slats
in the blinds across his chest

while the nurse pushes the tube
feeding formula

into the nub below his breast.

He holds her hand

when she's done, lets his fingers linger
a moment too long.

MEDICINE CITY: ROOM 202 (DEMENTIA)

Long toothed, she looks over
my shoulder, finds that elm
with the chain burrowing into the bark.
Her own flesh, torn at the wrist
Where the hospital band dug in,
rolled back epidermis, exposed
the delicate layer below, rosy
when she gnashes incisors
at me. She asks how that metal
doesn't choke the roots. A moment
of lucidity. We watch teardrop
leaves molt, amble to the ground
while they flush her
pickline with saline, the tin
hot on her breath
when she asks me to let her go.

MEDICINE CITY: ROOM 471 (TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY)

We wonder at the nurses' station
what he might have been

like before: Chippewa Falls, Grain
Belt. The small gifts

he gives us. Later, he bows,
stumbles into me. Shows

off that half-moon scar—a crescent
of loose flap folded over

new bone. Before, nothing
kept those early bits inside.

We wonder if the little changes
might add up

like inches of snow in Chippewa Falls,
a return to being again.

UNDISPUTEDS: THE LONG COUNT^v

neutral corners: those strange spaces
out of bounds for a moving mass like you
always throwing and
through

familiar stories: poor boy dropping out
in elementary school
to work and by 16
sleeping in the hobo camps

until first title: 1919 and Jess Willard, the giant
6'6" and fifty-eight pounds on you. He's knocked down
seven times in the first round
you, felling the giant

heavyweight champ: 1926, you lose to Tunney
10 rounds, and to your wife, Estelle, "Honey,
I forgot to duck,"
a long year—10 rounds

and the long count: rematch in Chicago,
that true left sprawled Tunney for 14 seconds
but slow counted 9, a punishment
for no retreat, for being

too mean to die: envision you with Estelle
propped on your shoulder, waving Chicago
gleaming with greasy hair and still
mean, but undisputed.

RECOVERY

Woke up crusty eyed
in a hospital bed
at the Mayo Clinic.
Breathe soft to keep
from feeling the sting of long
incision and parts taken,
replaced. I sleep mostly
as family and friends drift
bedside and give
my swollen hands
a squeeze and my new
thin hair a tousle.

The nurses wake me.
Walk me up and down
the hallway past
the other patients,
groaning and rattle sighing
on the 6th floor.
I'm hunched
and heavy footed. Feel ages
older as I waddle
down the corridor.

RECOVERY II

It's a long drive
through scorched fields
in July from the hospital.
I wince at every bump
while my father side eyes
me from his lean
on the steering wheel.

I worry about what we
might have left in Rochester—
a memory or a closeness
to one another
tucked behind a chart
or wheelchair.

We talk about diets
and apologies we will make
for ways we acted in a small
hospital recovery room.
We speak vaguely, of moments
in foggy diners and coffee shops.
This time
things will be different.

UNDISPUTEDS: MANSLAUGHTER^{vi}

Hard right smashed into temple
dropped the light heavyweight.

Max Baer *slugged Campbell unmercifully*
in the 5th, unconscious but still stands

by the gentle embrace of ropes.
How does a brain detach?

What connective bits can be loosened
by mere hands? *Frankie Campbell*

is dead, read the papers. Baer, offering
new widow, Ellie, the hand that killed

her husband. Baer, tender fighter
cries for Frankie Campbell. Baer,

forever sorry. Ellie says to him, *It even might*
have been you, mightn't it?

IT IS HUMAN NATURE

to be
capable of:

dying
—piles in autumn
—deader in bags.

Burning
leaves—cinnamon
—and then a lilt in our speech. We're set to cough,

sputtering
when the smallest parts
flint off and spire northerly, knock us

groundways.
A moment: We can be warm under
a flannel comforter. We can be naked

branches, shadows against a window pane
—cankered limbs
silhouetted through trash bags.

WE WERE ALL AWARE

and allowed each other
long pauses, stifled laughter
in the waiting room. That hiccup

(after the bad news first (we mean *cancer*
here)): grandma stepping out for air,
quiet religion, one last time again.

Another joke by the time she's
silhouetted by the fogged glass: avoidance
theory (we mean to forget).

She's stone faced
or grinning each time
she comes back.

Family tells me she breaks
down only once she's out
the door. *God's plan:*

my scan hung against the light
board. Too much black
and white for a Catholic.

MEDICINE CITY: SUBWAY

Short ceiling underground, the ambling
corridors bent to a “T.” Old couple
on a stroll between appointments, pass
wide windows, manikins in scrubs
toting oxygen tanks on wheels.

How many wrong turns? Suddenly,
belly of a hotel banquet hall—hollow
and awaiting a celebration, any win.
Embarrassed turnaround, holding hands
on an awkward walk past the same clerks

and another desperate, Midwestern wave.
Above ground, in natural light, a blind
of snow. Too much white when the two
emerge from the storefronts and endless
hallways underneath—damn near black

or total darkness. His hand stretched out
to blot out the sun, other elbow bent for her
to lace arms. Walking above ground. Above
the medical gift shops. Onward to the next
appointment, blinding light.

UNDISPUTEDS: SONNY LISTON AS A METAPHOR

My brother,
barely thirteen years old,
stands like a boxer:
hands held high
with elbows tucked tight,
covering vital organs.
He leans lanky,
crispy blonde tresses in his eyes
across from a tall boy
—broad shouldered bully.
From a leaky mouth,
“Faggot” drips out.

Earlier, in the backyard,
I teach him to parry
and the finer points
of the defensive shell.
He covers up, but hesitates
when it’s time to throw.
The difference is stark,
black trunks vs. white,
between eating punches
and a counter cross.
He is not a fighter, the best
I can do is to remind him
not to let the brute inside.

FORGETTING THE ENGAGEMENT (CHEMO BRAIN)

Try hard to remember blood
flooding from her nose
My wife reminds me this:
we bumped faces
that first night in her bed.
It comes back slow,
congealing into a scab
of memory.

I'm manufacturing more
than I'm recalling,
but her face droops
when she realizes the moment
is gone, left only for her.

Sometimes I feel those first months
encroaching on the periphery,
a shadow of the animal
just beyond the aperture, toying
with the tiny scope of my lens.
It's washed out—
but present—a whirl
of limbs and fur
beyond our window,
just out of sight.

STITCHES

I've been close
to making that call,
but I was so tired
of protecting those stitches.

A month out of surgery:
there are shadows on my liver
indicating that it must
be back.

At some point I decided
not to tell her that I was finished.
Still, a mother deserves to know
before her child expires.

UNDISPUTEDS: UNDEFEATED^{vii}

swarmer, iron-chinned bastard

latecomer, fighting as a natural at 24

slugger, strong armed with that ugly

boxerface, you throw at everything

brickhands, break bodies down until numb

shitweaver, two knockdowns from all those left feet

undefeater, the undisputed ugly boxing champ

HO(C)KEY

I've already lost
my hair
when her friends
invite us to a hockey game.
This is Minnesota after all.

We're close to the ice
and I wear a hat indoors
to keep the cold from sinking
in deep, shivering me,
telling everyone that I don't belong

in such a public forum.
I mask up
to protect myself from
the things that crowds
can carry.

A man in front of us
whispers about me
too loud. And while I'm
away, getting concession stand
food—an attempt at normalcy—

he asks, “what the fuck
is up with that guy?”
And my wife snaps back
with the big “C” loaded.
I'm proud

to have someone who'll
take a shot at a stranger
for me; I'm embarrassed
for being there at all—
that this is necessary.

UNDISPUTEDS: MANOS DE PIEDRA^{viii}

Roberto, you are him,
 prototype. True fighter.
 Angry eyes: tiny slits:
 chilly coals: somehow alight:

burning.
 Fury: this is you

fighting Sugar Ray Leonard (first time)
 There is no hate like yours.
 You are all Panama then, felling
 the obnoxious and arrogant
 American.

Duran/Leonard II: you say *No Mas!*
 We cannot forgive you
 for this.

Still, you are unceasing
 in your charity. You love the poor
 in ways only those who
 truly ached can.
 There,
 that's when you retain
 the title.

THE DOOR OPEN SO WE COULD

let the room breathe. Crawled
the length of the hallway
in total shiver, all shaking bones.
Found the tile of the bathroom

and lost my clothes
along the baseboards—too cold
when my wife finds me, cheek flush
against that slow arch of porcelain

and the floor. She hooks my arms—
too tired to cry—and rolls me
into the bath, and I'm sorrying
while she runs the water,

whispering at the doorway; I'm still
apologizing for the urine and vomit.
For not being strong
enough to call out.

DIAGNOSIS II

Sat in a wooden chair—strong armed and stared
across the exam table at gray hospital walls—somehow warm

as if whispered into place. Hot breath—my feet look far away
poking off the edge. My knees swim

tucked beneath a loose gown. I feel small and years
too young for the taste of dry wood tongue depressers.

Too young doctors swarm with charts and scans that look
inside with head shakes and tongue clicks.

My feet, dangling inches from cold floor, reached out
one extra toe length. I was swimming through gray

and intravenous drip. Let the news wash over me, think about
all the things growing inside. How they can make a body turn.

FOG THAT GLASS

They must fog that glass to keep the news
inside—those gray exam rooms in the back
where the oncologist gave me the true odds.

EULOGY FOR A SPOUSE: CANCER SUICIDE

I can't get the blood out
 from the couch
 where we first kissed.
 I'm trying to forget

the odd weight, delicate
 churn of your muscles
 on my back when I carried you
 into the sea so that I could

wash you. Your body felt just
 like a blanket.

I'm angry at those few months:
 the doctors and those needles,
 you pissing blood and turning
 blue. The strange phonology

of death in my mouth when I try to
 define it for our children. You're the empty
 depression in our couch now, the on-
 -off humming of the kitchen. I have

lost you. Your body felt just
 like a sweater

that wards off the sting of winter.
 I'm wishing that I could have been
 someone that you could have talked to.
 Wishing I could have kept you

from letting out your wrists
 while I was a room away. We could
 have fought. I want to build a tower to all
 the things you could have been. You are

not you. Your body felt just like
 a monsoon.

JUNE 21ST*For Hannah*

Carnival light: your hair caught,
backlit by plush boardwalk
neon. We lean into familiar jingle, hail
of firework—those kids running
through the elephant ear lines,
smelling like sweat and sunscreen.

Let's spin perpetual—ride
those Ferris wheels and tilt
-a-whirls and never get off.

Couple of kids at the ring toss,
beaming with a few bucks from mom
—reminds us what it is to be young,
to throw ourselves headlong
into the summah, batter-fried and savory.
But we are young! Let's love
like a carnival—sting of sunburn

on flume seat, crush of gravity
on spinning cups—wild with laughter
and sun stroke.

Sometimes I am embarrassed
of the way I feel a swell rise
in me, loud crash of changing
tide—my mouth, a jetty declaring
love! love! love! But, you're always
there, baptized in carnival glow,
us begging that we may be
drunk on the season—84 degrees forever.

STILL LIFE OF A FOLDED ORANGE PEEL

reminds me summer:
baseball. orange
slices and sunflowers.
sour and salt. sweet
sweat in my catcher's
crouch. long shadows,
umpire over my shoulder.
padded womp.
pitch in my mitt.
sun sets slowly.

Older, drag the field, edge
grass and mound. pleasure
of baseball (the whole concept
of game—of play).
gardening, cultivating
the dirt and grass.

UNDISPUTEDS: ON THE ROPES (GLASSJAW)

The rose in my teeth flutters
onto my chin,
blooming, then wilting
as I kiss my brother's fingertips.

His hands, thorned lilies,
cover my eyes with fleeting glances,
crimson petals.
Glimmering stars
dot my view.
Burn into supernovas,
then glittering blackness.
My brother's thumbs, delicate nubs,
are orchids
caressing the hinge of my jaw.

When I was a boy
I would watch crowds gather
at the Garden
to see the flowers bloom.
Champion, blue ribbon cuts
glistening with pride and midnight dew.

My brother lays my honeysuckle skull
upon spindles of grass
as holy bells ring
hymns of my childhood.
Ding, ding, dinging
as he stands over me,
lilies raised,
counting petals.

UNDISPUTEDS: SUGAR^{ix}

You are America, Sugar:
 your shiny car at night,
 flamingo pink Cadillac.
 You fight as chameleon, all
 styles and stances, a body
 of combustion, the mechanical
 heart of 1950.

This is a changed body, you,
 the first true black star,
 flamboyant and sparkling.

Pound for pound:
 a phrase made only
 for you. True legends
 sound like myth.

This is the fable:

Featherweight

Lightweight

Welterweight

Middleweight

Light Heavyweight

moving through classes
 with the sleekness
 and shine—you glistening
 in arena light.

You are ageless
 in a white robe,
 bowing, stately
 before 10,000 in Pittsburgh.
 And though you are knocked
 down for a nine count
 in the fourth, you go
 the distance, losing
 on the cards. But, this
 is a victory. 25 years:
 curtain call.

SOME LIGHT

makes your dark darker.
Katrina says. New spring
and I hear the twirling song
of some bird beyond her office
window. I say *there's too many*
birds in poems. But here they
are. Black snow, shriveled
along the curb and I feel
fourteen again. Punk rock,
the way the dirty things
come beautiful these days.
This is to say that I am noticing
again. *I notice. I notice. I notice.*
Sometimes it's too easy, forgetting
to feel goodness when our
dark comes out light—
decide there's no scraps to cut
—let the birds sing.

THE END OF THE APPOINTMENT

*And you walk that road
blazing, some days not even afraid to die..*
-Katrina Vandenberg, "Fuschia"

When you get out
of the hospital,
step into gray
March. The long walk

from the oncology
suite (those cubbies,
too big chairs and
tubes. So much waste.)

will hobble you. Your feet—
already numb—will flake
off. Small bits
of toe and nail

discarded onto the side-
walk, like confetti after
a parade. Outside, that
commune of death cannot

follow you. The ladies
who knit hats for us,
the grandmother on her seventh
cycle. Thank God that you are

the youngest here. Continue
walking until you feel your knees
nub into the concrete—
at least you've been spared

the indignity of children
and their eggshell heads
blinding in hospital light—
those bright tired smiles.

THE LIGHT THIS MORNING

fractures over the window pane—
casts shadows across the bed.
I make it every morning, tuck
corners and sides beneath the box spring,
as if that ritual might make me new.

footnotes on “Undisputed”

- ⁱ Sonny Liston (Generally)
- ⁱⁱ Mike “The Rice Street Rocker” Evgen, a Saint Paul boxing great
- ⁱⁱⁱ Joe Frazier (with reference to the Rocky Balboa statue in Philadelphia)
- ^{iv} Willie Pep (Generally)
- ^v The Long Count Fight: Jack Dempsey vs. Eugene Tunney. September 27, 1927
- ^{vi} Max Baer vs. Frankie Campbell. August 25, 1930
- ^{vii} Rocky Marciano (Generally)
- ^{viii} Roberto Duran vs. “Sugar” Ray Leonard. I: June 20, 1980. II: November 25, 1980.
- ^{ix} “Sugar” Ray Robinson (Generally, with reference to last fight. November 10, 1965)