The time you won your town the race

We chaired you through the market-place;

Man and boy stood cheering by,

And home we brought you shoulder-high.

---A.E. Housman, “To an Athlete Dying Young”

Strange, isn’t it, how words written by a British poet, first read by me in a high school literature class decades ago, have come to resonate in a way they never did when I was wrestling with the intricacies of iambic pentameter.

Only last week, Steve McNair, the dynamic – and married -- former quarterback for Alcorn State University, the Houston Oilers and Tennessee Titans, was shot dead by a 20-year-old mistress who apparently was distraught by the prospect of being replaced by another woman. The about-to-be-scorned lover then turned the gun on herself. McNair, shot twice in the head and twice in the chest while he was asleep, was only 36.

Now the boxing world has received the same sort of cold slap in the face that football fans received when they learned that McNair, who retired from the NFL following the 2007 season because of on-field injuries that had left his once-magnificent body a network of torn flesh, fractured bones, jammed fingers and dislocated shoulders, had died while sitting on a sofa.

Arturo Gatti, the fight game’s human highlight reel, gone at 37. And, police in Brazil have indicated, not from natural causes. Isn’t that the logical conclusion when a man’s wife returns to their hotel suite, where they and their 10-month-old baby had gone for the couple’s romantic “second honeymoon,” and finds her husband’s blood-stained body, clad only in his underwear, with wounds on his neck and to the back of his head?

Longtime boxing promoter J Russell Peltz more or less introduced Gatti to the region that would become his professional home when the Montreal-born brawler appeared at Philadelphia’s Blue Horizon three times from 1991 to ’92. From there Gatti moved his base of operations 65 miles east, to the New Jersey shore, where 23 of his 30 ring appearances in the state were in Atlantic City, the last nine of which were before sellout crowds in Boardwalk Hall.

“He was the franchise in Atlantic City for years,” Peltz said Saturday, after news of Gatti’s death earlier in the day had traveled north, first as rumors that no one wanted to believe. “He was the Rocky Graziano of his era, and one of the most exciting fighters ever.

“It’s a shame, to die that young. What else can you say?”

Well, perhaps that Gatti's thousands of fans – who knows, maybe there were millions who cherished him as much as those who turned Boardwalk Hall into his personal shrine – always feared that a fighter who constantly stared into the face of danger and spit in its eye would end up more or less this way. But their concerns were that Gatti, whose moderate boxing skills always were overshadowed by his determination to press on through pain and seemingly hopeless odds, would perish in the ring rather than to submit to any gloved opponent. A referee might save him in a particular bout. His manager or his promoter could advise him to walk away while his legs still worked and his speech was unslurred. But once the bell rang, Gatti would rather run through hell in a gasoline suit than to leave any part of himself in reserve.

We so often have heard fighters say that the only way to leave a fight, the sport or life itself is on their shield that the words become almost meaningless. But when spoken by Gatti, you believed that he actually might choose death before the dishonor of quitting before he had given the last full measure of devotion inside the ropes.

"My fans deserve the best and I give them the best," he once said of the reason why he was so beloved in Jersey and points beyond. "I was told lots of times in the amateurs that I had more heart and determination than other fighters. I think I have talent. But to be a fighter, the intangibles are something you need more than anything to be successful.

"I wish all my fights were easy, but I knew that if it comes to that, I've got the heart, guts and determination to win the tough ones. Any time I need to bring that stuff out, it comes."

A former IBF junior lightweight champion who won his title in, naturally, a rousing, give-and-take slugfest with Tracy Harris Patterson, Gatti was living proof of the old Yogi Berra adage that it ain't over 'til it's over. You could slice his face to ribbons, turn his eyes into ugly, purple hematomas and have more squeamish spectators praying that someone merciful and in a position of authority would step in to save him, but that was when "Thunder," like an injured animal, was most dangerous.

Sometimes he won, sometimes he lost, but his indomitable heart was forever on display in unforgettable matchups with Patterson, Wilson Rodriguez, Gabriel Ruelas, Angel Manfredy, Ivan Robinson (twice) and Micky Ward (three times).

Lou DiBella used to book Gatti fights when he was senior vice-president of HBO Sports. Later, after he had left the premium-cable giant, DiBella advised Gatti opponents Ward and Leonard Dorin. But, really, it didn't matter which side of the fence DiBella was on at a particular moment in time. He is a fight fan first and foremost, and Gatti gave him the same thrills he delivered to everyone else.

"I make no bones about my love for Arturo Gatti," DiBella said some years ago. "I think he's an icon in our sport. I think he's the best of the best. In my 20 years of televised boxing, he's the best TV fighter I've ever seen."

Gatti also frequently was my muse, the inspiration for me to author some of the more noteworthy phrases to have made it into print and onto the Internet during my many years of

watching fights and fighters. A.E. Housman could tell you, if he were still around; there has to be something that touches the soul of any writer, something to open a journalistic vein and allow the words to seep out like the crimson flow of blood from a gash in busted scar tissue on a fighter's face.

"Boxing is an improbable union of naked power and subtle artistry, of stark fear and unbridled courage, those contradictions splashing the entire tableau of human emotions upon a canvas of a different sort than the ones used by Monet and Picasso. And the color most prevalent is blood-red," I once wrote in an article about Gatti.

Of the increasing cragginess of Gatti's visage, I noted that he "once was a handsome man, and he still has what might be described as rugged good looks, once the swelling goes down and the cuts have healed."

Perhaps most prescient, I thusly compared Gatti's improved boxing skills during his time with trainer Buddy McGirt to his willingness to revert to his old, brawling ways as the need arose: "Just beneath the surface of Gatti's frequently lumped, contused and sutured skin is an irresistible itch to rumble."

Now that Gatti – whom I often compared to a hold-nothing-back warrior of an earlier time, Matthew Saad Muhammad, which is as high a level of praise as I can bestow on any action fighter – who among active boxers can reach deep inside of me to pull out the best that I and other like-minded writers have to give? Israel Vazquez? Probably. Manny Pacquiao? No doubt. But Gatti, like Saad Muhammad, is an original, beyond replication. A piece of me has died along with him, dust tossed to the wind.

For this past couple of weeks, during which such assorted celebrities as Farrah Fawcett, Michael Jackson, Karl Malden, Alexis Arguello and McNair died of causes ranging from disease, prescription drug abuse, old age, suicide and homicide, we all have had occasion to take stock in the precious and often fleeting nature of life itself.

I was never that huge a Michael Jackson fan, and his daffier personal proclivities often left me baffled, but I understand how his passing at 50 could elicit international mourning. Few individuals are blessed with the sort of talent to impact the world, and when they cross over to the other side we are left to wonder if someone can or will fill the void.

McNair's undeniable courage was put on display any number of times on football fields across this nation, and his community service is such that he won additional admirers for reasons that transcended his ability to throw a tight spiral. Fawcett, 30-plus years removed from her Charlie's Angels heyday, inspired us with her brave refusal to yield without a fight to the ravaging effects of anal cancer.

There are those who will tell you that Jackson's emotional arrested development and the charges of pedophilia overshadow the hit records and the innovative dance moves. The same tsk-tskers now say that McNair's legacy is irrevocably damaged because he was less praiseworthy as a husband than he was in leading his team to a winning touchdown in the

two-minute drill.

However one chooses to remember a fallen icon is, of course, up to each individual. And I say this knowing that some are waiting for dirt to surface that might smear the boxing legacy of Arturo Gatti, who likely was as flawed as any human being. It is perhaps part of our makeup to think that the failings of the rich and famous somehow elevate those of us who are neither rich nor famous.

Was Arturo Gatti simply the victim of a botched robbery attempt in which there were multiple assailants and blunt instruments? Is there something nefarious that has yet to come to light that would make us think less highly of him than we did when he was laying bare his soul in the ring? Only time will tell.

But there is little likelihood on my part to regard Arturo Gatti as anything less than he was when he bled and suffered for our entertainment. He was never the most talented guy around – Floyd Mayweather Jr. once dismissed him as a “C-plus” fighter – but he gave all that he had, and when that was expended, he rummaged around inside himself to find a bit more.

Rest in peace, Arturo. Here’s hoping that your body is returned to Boardwalk Hall in the next few days for the sort of public tribute and farewell that the sequined-gloved moonwalker got at the Staples Center.

Thrillers such as you deserve no less.