William Faulkner once said “the past is not dead, it isn’t even past. Jack Chase might have added that it is especially so when you drink too much booze.

Chase, his live-in girlfriend, and Aaron “Tiger Wade were sitting in a bar on Fillmore Street in San Francisco the night after Christmas 1943. Just before midnight, Chase shot Wade in the left shoulder with a .32 caliber pistol. All three, including Wade, said it was an accident. Chase had reached in his pocket for cigarettes and somehow the gun fell out of his shirt, hit the table, and went off. Or so the story went. The police confiscated the gun and noticed that the serial numbers had been filed off. Chase was arrested and charged. It was his third setback, the third time he sat in a jail cell since boxing gave him a second chance.

Chase was freed on $1,000 bail and eventually cleared of the charges, but the curtain rapidly descended on his career. He turned thirty on January 27th and lost a step just as things were heating up. In 1943 he went 3-1-1 against fellow members of Murderers’ Row. In 1944 he went 1-8-1. It wasn’t for lack of trying. After losing a ten-rounder against master boxer Holman Williams in a showcase of skills that old-timers in the crowd raved about, Chase demanded a rematch over twelve rounds and got it exactly two weeks later. This time, he moved less and missed more. Williams eclipsed him as the premier middleweight of the west.

He was face-down on the canvas after Charley Burley’s rapid-fire right hands put him there in April. Earlier in the bout, Chase had to find it in him to beat the count. Now the count beat him and he needed help getting to his corner. It was the first time he suffered a knockout in almost seven years.

Insiders saw it coming. A few days before the Burley fight, Chase was in Los Angeles sparring with a squat heavyweight named Turkey Thompson. That was his first mistake. His second mistake, according to the word on the street, was in somehow offending the 218 lb. Thompson. Thompson retaliated with a colossal blow. Chase was unconscious for thirty minutes and woke up with a dislocated jaw. He was lucky he didn’t wake up dead.

He met Williams for the third time in Denver only two weeks after losing to Burley. Chase was going backwards in this fight for the first six rounds, then in the seventh he and Williams stood toe-to-toe with Chase appearing to get the better of it. By the eighth, the damage was mounting. Chase’s left eye was closed shut and that was the least of it. *The Denver Post’s* Jack Carberry witnessed a disturbing spectacle from ringside:

“[Chase’s] jaw, which was re-dislocated in the sixth, began to hurt frightfully. He would put his hands up to protect it. You could read the pain on his features.

Williams reminded Carberry of a Yankee machine gunner as he shot that jab at Chase’s eye, and the sickening sound of wet leather smashing into a swollen hematoma made him wince. After Williams noticed Chase favoring his jaw, he aimed for that. Ringsiders thought that Chase

might faint from the pain. In the thirteenth, he fell through the ropes and climbed back in as the referee's count reached eight. Chase went down again in the closing minutes. Somehow –God knows how- he got up and finished fifteen rounds.

All told, he fought Williams no less than four times that year and couldn't defeat him. He faced Cocoa Kid in October and lost every round. Chase may have had trouble anyway with supreme stylists like Williams and the Kid but it was clear that he had slowed down. His style relied on swift feet and as nature stiffened his joints, he could no longer move in and out fast enough to escape the ferocity of his peers on Murderers' Row. Burley stopped him again and Lloyd Marshall managed to outpoint him to even up their series. Tiger Wade recovered from his gunshot wound and gave Chase a thrashing until he suffered an injury in the last round. Either a raking glove or a punch or both temporarily paralyzed an optic nerve in Wade's eye, forcing a stoppage.

Knowing Chase, this is suspicious.

Like the rest of the human race, Chase had his devils and his angels. Sportswriters who spoke to him seemed to like him -at times they would get protective when he had no cause to deserve it. They glossed over his crimes and his criminal record and readily acknowledged his good manners. Eddie Muller of the *San Francisco Examiner* never even mentioned the Wade shooting in his column. *The Denver Post* sports editor wrote that "Jack Chase is a gentleman to his fingertips.

He does not fit neatly into anyone's box; he was too complicated for such niceties. We all are. Dig deep in any man's history and you're sure to come up with surprises. Chase, for example, sought to better himself in ways other than boxing. In early February of 1944, a fellow passenger on a Los Angeles train noticed him reading a book. The passenger quietly leaned in and saw the title -it was the *Iliad*. Homer's ancient masterpiece is a bloody memorial to themes like glory in battle, consequences of ego and rage, homecoming, and destiny. How appropriate. His description of the central warrior of the epic could just as well describe Chase ("Achilles of the swift feet).

By 1946, Chase was thirty-two years old and fighting less. He briefly retired "to his books according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Perhaps the *Iliad* had something to do with it. "Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men, Homer wrote,

Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth,
Now the living timber bursts with new buds
And spring comes round again. And so with men:
As one generation comes to life, another dies away.

This veteran wasn't dead yet. He was diversifying. When the wind scattered old leaves across lawns, he was ready with his rake. "Let Jack Chase (Former Calif. Boxing Champion) Fight Your Lawn, Landscaping Problems, read his business card, "PERSONAL SERVICE, REASONABLE RATES, GUARANTEED SATISFACTION.

On the occasions that he did lace up his gloves, those swift feet of his were stuck in mulch. A teenager with thirty fights beat him with, of all things, a jab and speed. Twice. In their next two matches, Chase evened the score, albeit just barely. Press row saw all the signs of an aging fighter –he was clinching more and moving less, swelling up more and punching less.

It was his will that saw him defeat Costello Cruz again and then battle Archie Moore to a stand-off at the end of 1946. These performances earned him a place on the third rung of the light heavyweight ladder. Alas, such heights are precarious when your balance goes. He lost his next three and fell down the ladder.

The last time he fought in Colorado was at Mammoth Gardens in what turned out to be a haunted homecoming. A St. Louis preacher named Deacon Logan was in the opposite corner. “Both fighters incurred the displeasure of the audience reported the *Denver Post*, after it became clear that neither was trying to hurt the other. The “waltz without music was declared a no-contest forty-five seconds into the sixth round. The Colorado boxing commission fined both $200 and suspended them for 90 days for “not giving forth their best efforts. Chase’s unwillingness may not be hard to explain. The last time he fought hard at Mammoth Gardens, Roy Gillespie collapsed and died.

Chase continued on, but it made less and less sense. He’d don his blue silk trunks to fight for purses almost as small as when he began. Soon, his career came full circle. His first win was at a high school auditorium back in Walsenburg and his last was at a high school field in Oregon twelve years later, a lifetime later. High schools, small auditoriums and fields, armories, union halls; these are the places where has-beens meet never-weres in matches that are only competitive because the respective skill sets (one declining, one never advancing) finally meet in the middle. It’s boxing’s pension plan.

Jack Chase retired from the ring for keeps in 1948.

An enduring complaint of aficionados is that so many notable fighters of the golden era were not filmed. Not so in Chase’s case. He appeared in a film called So Dear to My Heart (1948) and then in the noir classic The Set-Up (1949). Hollywood not only bit him but shot him with an arrow. He was married for a time to Lillian Randolph, a cast member on the Amos ‘n Andy radio show.

The gym was as close as he ever got to a permanent home, so it is no surprise to learn that he became a trainer. Boxing historian Hap Navarro was the Assistant Matchmaker at Hollywood Legion Stadium in 1949 and watched Chase work with the popular Art Aragon. “Chase, he remembered, “had a soft-spoken but very effective way of instructing Artie during the sparring sessions in the Legions permanent ring. In 1958, he moved to Spokane, Washington where he became something of a wintery sage for a new generation. He earned rave reviews as a “superior teacher by the *Spokane Review* for his work with a local heavyweight. He also trained an undefeated middleweight and a lightweight named Kaley “Kelly Sonners who won five of six by knockout before going off to Vietnam where he was killed in action.

It was poignant to learn that he worked for Goodwill Industries. Goodwill is a nonprofit

organization that provides assistance for the less privileged -including young men just released from prison. He drove a truck for them for fourteen years until illness forced him out in the fall of 1971.

The illness was fatal.

He sat alone in his apartment on South Pine Street and waited, though he wouldn't wait long.

On March 23rd 1972, the fifty-eight year old former boxer slumped in his chair. His visage, mashed and marred under brows heavy with scar tissue, betrayed his vigorous past. That past swirled in his mind like the morning mist atop the Rocky Mountains. This is Jack Chase of Murderers' Row, good enough to defeat the best of that fabled set, ducking none. This is the fresh-faced "Young Joe Louis who rose up out of southern Colorado in the 1930s like one of those black blizzards and buried his competition. This is Isaiah, a fatherless boy whose striking maroon eyes looked up with promise at his mother.

Boxing rescued Isaiah, of that there can be no doubt. It offered an alternate route to the dead end that seemed to be preordained for him; a dead end that he was careening toward until the day an anonymous trainer at a state reformatory taught him how to wrap his hands. After that, his definitions began to change for the better. He became something special. Like those other black men exalted and condemned by their remarkable skills, battling among themselves on the West Coast, he was never granted a world title shot and never got rich. But boxing gave him something better. It gave him something –heroic- to reach for.

He battled desperately in that ring, as if everything depended on it. It mattered that much. Now and then he made a mistake and was knocked down. If he was too hurt to get up with dignity, he'd crawl to his feet without it. It mattered that much. Somewhere along the alternate route he chose decades earlier, somewhere between a wayward son's rage and a great fighter's singular glory, he learned how to care. Perhaps his redemption, a long-time coming, had come along and those scars on his soul were healed by the scars on his face. Who can say?

Spring's new buds were beginning to burst outside the window when he slumped in that chair. There, with old regrets lightened, I hope, by a pride that swelled his chest

…Jack Chase breathed his last.

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The series of photographs opening this essay was taken by O.A. Sealy for the Denver Post, 4/29/44.

Many early fights involving "Young Joe Louis were covered in the World-Independent and the Denver Post. Statistics regarding the Dust Bowl found in Surviving the Dust Bowl: Timeline of the Dust Bowl, 1931-1939 by Joseph Tovares (PBS Online). Quotes and information regarding Archie Moore found in Dr. Marilyn G. Douroux's Archie Moore: The Ole Mongoose and Moore's Any Boy Can: The Archie Moore Story. Information regarding the Dust Bowl and the Great Plains derived from The Worst Hard Time by Timothy Egan and The Great Plains by Ian

Frazier. The late Eddie Muller of the San Francisco Examiner deserves much credit for his coverage of those tournaments fought among the fighters later known as "The Black Murderers' Row. I am indebted to Editor Michael Woods for his patience and expertise; to Barbara Dey of the Colorado Historical Society and to the staff at the Denver Public Library, especially Wendel Cox; as well as to Dan Cuoco, Hap Navarro, and Harry Otty for their help. Special thanks to the staff at Colorado State Archives, particularly Erin McDanal.

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