

Smoke, Mirror

Jack Bedell

*“When a man gets in your
blood like that, you can’t
never let go.”*

— Joe Frazier

A half dozen people have told me
they’d die for me, would give
their lives for my love.
Every one of them is still alive,
in some other town, raising
someone else’s children.

When I was nine, I watched Joe Frazier
try his best to die for me in Manila.
My father let me stay home from school
to wait in line for the cable box to watch the fight.
We were together all day, waiting.

I don’t remember eating
or talking at all that day,
just the explosion of hate
released by the opening bell.

Half-blind to start and all blind
by the third round, Frazier planted
his forehead in Ali’s chest, followed
the man’s breath around the huge ring,
walking through fists like rain.

By the fifth, Frazier had Ali
off his toes and cringing.
To him, Ali was a sack of bricks
hung over a tree limb in South Carolina,
and he punished that dead weight
for its uselessness. My father and I
threw every punch with him
and prayed for the one
that would put Ali to ground.

We watched Frazier catch rights
until his face opened and his eyes shut.
Watched him shuffle forward into darkness
round after round. What he wanted
was plain to see. We wanted it, too.
What kept him standing and chasing
and throwing hands outdistanced
even that desire.

In the fourteenth, Frazier took
nine straight shots to the head
without landing anything himself,
and I thought for a second
he was dead on his feet,
but he closed out the round
digging into Ali’s body, taking
what soul the man had to give.
One more punch would have ended it,
both ways.

Towel

Jack Bedell

Then it was over. The men
 in Frazier's corner valued life
 with a different economy
 than he did, saw tomorrow
 as better currency than a fifteenth round.
 They did not see Ali in his own corner
 slumped and ready for it to end.
 Only that it had to end.

There's no forgetting how Frazier
 jumped off his stool, begging
 through the blood in his mouth
 for one more punch, one more
 lunge into the darkness.
 I saw how far he was willing to go
 and will always love him for it.

Editorial note: "Smoke, Mirror" was the title poem in Jack Bedell's leadoff section of *This Loss Behind Us: A Triple Play of Poetry*, our 2017 chapbook featuring up to 10 poems from a trio of contest winners. Bedell was followed by Paul Hostovsky and M.K. Punky.

Not sure if it was for the promise of brutality or some act of empathy, but my son asked me the other night if there was a fight I could remember where I wished somebody had stopped it before it ended on its own. Or before it had even begun.

I know my old man would've said Louis-Marciano, but Louis needed that one bad, and he made it through enough rounds to go out on his shield. I could've given him Cooney-Norton, but that one wasn't worth the watch with Norton way past his prime and having nothing to do but eat left hooks until he went unconscious.

So I settled on Ali-Holmes.

My son definitely knew what Ali was, and he was old enough to remember seeing what Ali became. I figured he'd appreciate seeing exactly what happens when both hands and mind are too slow to deal with a younger, skilled, hungry champion made in your own image. In your own gym, actually.

I told my son to pay attention to all the times Ali saw it coming but had nothing left to do anything about it. Then I asked him to let me know if he saw Ali throw a single punch that would've made his corner think it was a good idea to hang on to that towel as long as they did.

Jack B. Bedell is professor of English and coordinator of Creative Writing at Southeastern Louisiana University where he also edits *Louisiana Literature* and directs the Louisiana Literature Press. Jack's work has appeared in *HAD*, *Heavy Feather*, *Pidgeonholes*, *The Shore*, *Moist*, *Okay Donkey*, *EcoTheo*, *The Hopper*, *Terrain*, and other journals. His work has also been selected for inclusion in *Best Microfiction* and *Best Spiritual Literature*. His latest collection is *Against the Woods' Dark Trunks*. He served as Louisiana Poet Laureate 2017-2019.