Written by Springs Toledo
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RIP Champion. [Artist Richard T. Slone, courtesy sloneart.com]

The strong men . . . coming on
The strong' men gittin' stronger.
Strong men. . . .
Stronger. . . .

~Sterling Brown (1900-1992)

I saw Smokin' Joe Frazier in the ring Saturday night. He was in the throes of battle, loving every moment as his whistling hooks broke another man. He went down; he got up, and absorbed a terrible beating that declared the force of his will…

James Kirkland sees no difference between boxing matches and turf wars. When that bell rings, he isn't thinking about points, whether they be the finer points of technique or the ones those stiff suits on stools keep track of. He isn't even thinking like a man; at times his matches resemble primal clashes over hunting grounds and mating rights, not sports contests. He's thinking about punching holes through his rival so that he can pull his heart out and show it to him with a bloody grin that says "I told you so."

Kirkland fights like someone who has suffered. The fact that much of his suffering was the direct result of his own bad decisions is beside the point.

The purest of modern brawlers was born in 1944, the youngest of twelve children raised on a sharecropper's farm in Beaufort, South Carolina during the bad old days of Jim Crow. Most of his kinfolk never left the region. They worked from sun-up to sun-down and at year's end had nothing more to show for it than the slaves they were descended from.

When he was 12, "Billy Boy," as he was called, would go out to the mule shack and punch a burlap sack filled with sand and rags. It might as well been filled with stardust because a chubby arm, his left one, began to crook and smash into the side of that sack with startling force.

When he was 15, someone went and talked about his mother. Both chubby arms lashed out and got him suspended from school. He never went back. He got a job driving a tractor and hauling water, but had a run-in with the boss man and had to flee the region like so many other black men too strong to hold their hats in hand and too wise to stick around. He went north in 1959, just another nameless face among the millions in what historians call The Great Migration. He was a part-time car thief in New York City, sleeping on a chair for two years in a crowded apartment.

Then Philadelphia beckoned.

Philadelphia –where fighters still rise out of the cracked concrete like black Spartans with rap sheets. He took a job in a slaughterhouse and punched hanging carcasses during breaks, and at 17 he walked into a gym on the north side of the city with his dreams. That was fifty years ago.

The man who would become Smokin' Joe Frazier never really left.

Men who have suffered sometimes get sentimental about it. They seek it out. Some pronounce the cynical maxim "life is hell" too many times and start embracing it: "Hell is life." Kirkland, like many pure brawlers, never feels as alive as when he is exchanging blows. He uses boxing to turn his frown upside down.

On Saturday night Kirkland was in the ring against Alfredo Angulo, a brawler as pure as himself. He went right to him at the opening bell and slammed both hands around his flanks and up the middle. Thirty seconds later, he bulled him into a corner and threw a straight left, then slipped to his right to avoid the counter. Angulo timed his slip and threw his own right, and Kirkland went down. His dysfunction was looking up. Even there on the canvas Kirkland was still looking at Angulo, though not with anger. It seemed more like the silent glance exchanged between two friends suffering –-or partying-– together that says “I’m glad you’re here.”

Angulo’s expression told us nothing. He’s a stoic whose mug wouldn’t change by a twitch whether he was in a state of ecstasy or having his toenails torn off with pliers. His actions, however, told us that he’s a gambler. The moment Kirkland got up and the referee waved the two fighters to resume battle, Angulo emptied his vault in a winner-take-all effort. He threw over 70 punches before the end of the round and landed over half of them.

How did Kirkland absorb that punishment?

-–Whatever put that stardust into a fat boy’s burlap sack in South Carolina happened to sprinkle some on an ex-convict from Texas Saturday night. And that’s as good an explanation as you’ll find anywhere.

Angulo’s exertions were for nothing. He punched himself out just as Kirkland began coming on again. It was a left hook that sent Angulo spiraling down Queer Street. When he collapsed at the end of that unforgettable first round, Angulo’s seconds frantically gestured for him to stay down for eight seconds, but he would have none of that. He got up immediately and hoped no one noticed that he ever went down in the first place. For the next five rounds Angulo was vulnerable and only semi-conscious. He fought on. His expression, soon distorted by punishment, still hadn’t changed.

Kirkland seemed to be enjoying it all.

In 1969, The New York Times carried an article about Joe Frazier entitled “The Killer” and the

Los Angeles Times ran a three-part series called "Man or Machine?" Tapping typewriters described the fighter's strange enthusiasm in the ring as "savage glee" and "blood joy." They saw Frazier grinning a bloody grin and eagerly nodding his head after landing a left hook hard enough to crack the ribs of dead cows in a Philly slaughterhouse. When moved off balance or knocked backwards, he'd clap his hands and then trot right back into close quarters like it was home sweet home.

At 1:59 of round six, Kirkland was feeling very much alive. His punches were landing with startling force one after another. The strong man was getting stronger, even as the story shifted to Alfredo Angulo. After being battered for five rounds Angulo's offense had become feeble and his defense stultified. Now his body was shuddering under the weight of violence and sagging for the first time in his professional career. All that was left was his will. The crowd at the Centro de Cancun gasped when they saw that Angulo would accept his terrible fate standing up.

The referee jumped in, stopped the fight, and probably saved his life.

October 1st 1975. At the end of the twelfth round in the third epic struggle between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali, Frazier's face had become a bulging mess. He told trainer Eddie Futch that he couldn't see out of the crouch position and Futch instructed him to "pull back a step and stand up" so that he could see better. But Ali picked up on the change and adjusted accordingly. He knocked Frazier's mouthpiece out of his mouth, over the ropes, and six rows back. Frazier was vulnerable and almost blind.

"I fought on," Frazier said afterward, "There was nothing else to do."

"And these are the kind of fighters who get hurt seriously," Eddie Futch recalled, "–those who won't go down, who will stay there and absorb the punishment when their body is just not capable of handling it anymore. And their mind tells them to stay up and their body just can't handle it."

In the corner before the beginning of the fifteenth round, the trainer looked at his fighter and said "Joe, I'm going to stop it." Frazier pleaded, "No, no, no!" Futch put his hand on the strong man's shoulder and said "sit down son.

…no one will ever forget what you did here today."

We never did. We never will.

Joe Frazier died last night in Philadelphia. He was diagnosed with liver cancer in late September and spent his last days at home surrounded by family. No merciful referee or wise trainer interfered while he battled on his own terms, and something tells me that he wouldn't have it any other way.

Joe Frazier's spirit will never die. We saw it in the ring Saturday night. We'll see it again.

The graphic appears with permission.

Background information about Frazier in Jack Griffin's "Frazier Still Dreaming As Ali Started His Climb," *Pittsburgh Press* 3/3/71 and "Catching Up With 'Smokin Joe Frazier'," by Sabina Clark in *Irish Edition,* 6/12/09. Descriptions of Frazier's "joy" in battle found in *New York Times* 7/20/67 and 6/26/69. Eddie Futch's recollections found in Ronald K. Fried's *Corner Men* (pp. 312-313)

and Dave Anderson's
In The Corner
(pp.246-247).

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brownsugar says:

another mindbending piece by toledo... great stuff.

Radam G says:

NICE! Springs To, NICE! Ya DA MAN! Holla!