

Kestrel

John Warner Smith

Parkinson's

You could have gone underground,
been invisible to the world, but not Ali,
not in your biggest fight,
the one for your life.

No spoken word rhymes and predictions like:

I might tremble and drag my feet,
but ain't no disease I can't beat.

No braggadocious declarations of greatness like:

Here I am world.
I'm a baaaad man!
I can't be beat.

No levitation and rope-a-dope
in your mummy walk and mask face,
your slurred speech and trembling hands,
not in this fight.
As Bundini would say,
this is God's work. He's doing the talking.
He's calling the shots now.

Ali, that night in Atlanta in 1996,
when you stepped into the darkness
and lit the sky for a hurting world,
you gave Parkinson's your face,
your name,
your strength and courage,
your grace.

Afghanistan

In 2002, you would step slowly
onto the hallowed ground of war-torn Afghanistan
holding a bouquet of flowers in your trembling hands.

You would be given a royal welcome.
You would bring a message of peace and hope.
You would visit a school in a canvas tent
and give volleyballs and jump ropes to young girls
who were once forbidden to attend school.
You would visit a bakery in Kabul
and receive a gift of bread from widows
who had lost their husbands in war.
You would visit a boxing club made of mud walls,
give gloves to young fighters,
and prove that you can still punch the bag.
You would be inspired by the faith, strength
and resiliency of the Afghan people,
your brothers and sisters.
You would see God.

Three years later, you would stand in the White House
while a U.S. President, Viet Nam-era veteran
of the Air National Guard,
hung a Presidential Medal of Freedom
around your neck, calling you “a man of peace,”
the government that once tried and convicted you,
and sentenced you to prison for draft evasion.
If there was ever any doubt
that the God you worship
neither slumbers nor sleeps
that moment dispelled it.

