

Of Dreams and Dumpsters

I met an old man once who lived outside.  
He was rough and drunk and felt like talking  
With everyone who passed by, so I tried  
To give him a buck and keep on walking,  
But he stopped me and gave the dollar back.  
More booze, not money, would keep his buzz right.  
All sales done, his bottle dry in its sack,  
He seemed out of luck, at least for tonight.

But a little buzzed too, I understood  
And had a twelve pack waiting in my car,  
So I told him and said “maybe could  
Drink some by the dumpster behind the bar?”  
Its damp rotten stench echoing his toast:  
“Da worl’ gon’ shit on you too man, you’ll see.”  
Here I was slumming with a bum while most  
Folks slept. I egged him on out of cruelty—

Hoping to laugh later with all my friends  
At this boozed-out old man’s philosophy.  
He takes a drink, stares me down, then begins—  
The words come slow, then gain velocity.  
He speaks lamenting of a poor youth lost  
In the dusty squalor of old Jim Crow  
And his lust to get out at any cost,  
Then deciding to give the Army a go.

It was here that he would learn how to fight—  
Not in war, but in the gym, with his fists.  
His eyes are lost in a past full of light,  
Not this dark present where his life consists  
Of drink and memories of better days.  
Upon discharge, the ring became his life,  
With uncanny speed and macho displays  
Of dispatching opponents. Like a knife,

He cut through the South’s amateur elite,  
And won a spot on the national team  
To fight for his country and to compete  
With the best in the world—a boxer’s dream.  
He won a silver that should have been gold,

Jeremy Beatson

But the judges didn't want a 'negro'  
Beating the Russian. The medal was sold  
To someone for booze money years ago.

The last piece of his former life now gone—  
Sometime, somewhere, he'd reached the bottom rung.  
He lives out here, like the trash, heaped upon  
Old boxes and crates, forgotten among  
The living. I left him my beer to drink,  
And went home sadder and wiser. A chance  
Encounter with a bum caused me to think  
Of why things die: time, fate, or circumstance.