

Poetry on the Menu

(Based on a true incident at Toot Shor's, set up and then recorded by writer George Plimpton)

By James Anthony Merolla

In January 1967, writer/participatory journalist George Plimpton dreamed up a publicity stunt for heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali. He arranged for him to meet Marianne Moore, decorated American poetess - a showman who creates doggerel rhymes, together with one of the finest true poets in the history of the English language. The pair couldn't be more opposite - He a gigantic, athletic man of color, at his physical peak, age 25, not formally educated, a Muslim, loud, charismatic, a showman with the burgeoning edge for social causes and advocacy; She, elderly, age 80, pasty white, doggedly Presbyterian, incredibly well educated, shy, frail and a kind of dowager spinster. Ali's poems, so called, which predicted his fights, were little more than expanded limericks. Moore's balletic verses and images won her the Pulitzer Prize, the National Medal in Literature and almost the Nobel Prize. Their host that day, Toots Shor, was a rough New York man of Jewish descent, who rubbed elbows, hosted, drank with, and incurred the wrath of entertainment giants of the first two-thirds of the 20th Century: Frank Sinatra, Charlie Chaplin, Ernest Hemingway, Joe DiMaggio, Marilyn Monroe, etc. The meeting only lasted a few minutes and produced a short poem, "On the annihilation of Ernie Terrell," Ali's next title foe. The playwright has expanded the meeting in a deeper way, as a one-act play, using snippets of Moore's poetry to frame the time, Ali's immediate and lasting appeal through his pithy quotes uttered over two decades, and foreshadowing his thoughtful future self.

Time: January 1967

Place: Toot Shor's Restaurant in downtown Manhattan, unit set, a single table, two chairs

Characters

Muhammad Ali.....Dashing heavyweight champion of the world, age 25

Marianne Moore.....Tiny Poet Laureate of the U.S., age 80

Toots Shor.....Bombastic nightclub owner, early 50s

Kandu.....A noble waiter, person of color, in his late 40s

(Before lights up, we hear the unmistakable vocal cadence of Muhammad Ali, off stage or a tape of the actual Ali, the bombastic former heavyweight champion of the world.)

I cain't be beat! Float like a butterfly,
Sting like a bee!
The man can't hit, what the man can't see!
Rumble, young man, rumble!
Rumble, young man, rumble!
Arrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

(Then, also on tape or live, the lighter, thinner voice of an elderly woman, educated, formal, stark contrast to the guttural roar heard a moment ago.)

They crowd him and curve him and aim for the knees.
Trying indeed! The secret implying:

 "I can stand here, bat held steady."

 One may suit him;
 none has hit him.

Imponderables smite him.

Muscle kinks, infections, spike wounds
require food, rest, respite from ruffians.

(Drat it!

 Celebrity costs privacy!)

Celebrity costs privacy!

There never was a war that was not inward; I must fight till I
have conquered in myself what causes war.

(January 1967. Unit set. Interior, a fine restaurant, Toots Shor's, with several tables spread apart, white tablecloths over each, fine wine glasses, cloth napkins, simple elegance. Lights come up on a single photo on a brick wall, a man holding court between Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe. Then a second light comes on the same man with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Jackie Gleason. Then, lights up on photos of others: Bert Lahr as the Cowardly Lion, Yogi Berra, Ernest Hemingway, Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Joe Louis. Then the lights come up on the entire brick wall with all these photos and more. The man is the constant celebrity schmoozer, servant to the stars, Toots Shor, proprietor of the famous eatery in Manhattan for two decades, sitting in a light gray suit and tie at one table, handkerchief in his breast pocket. Standing behind him is a finely dressed waiter, a person of color, swarthy, non-descript, usual height,

middle-aged, but still trim, experienced as a server, but unmemorable as a man. He stands at military attention.)

TOOTS

(Shaking his head, dousing cigarette, Speaks in a quick Bronx clip.) I don't know, Kandu. I don't know how that stiff Brit George Plimpton talked me into this. These two are from different worlds. I don't think they are the same species. I know this is great publicity for the place and God knows, lately I can use it. Goddamn IRS. But most of my clients don't like this guy. Frank Sinatra hates him. I had to make sure Frank was in Chicago this week before I agreed to this, or he'd have my head. When he finds out about it, he may never come in here again. I oughtta have my head examined.

WAITER/KANDU

(With a slight African accent) Mr. Sinatra is your oldest friend in New York, Mr. Shor. He would not do this to you.

TOOTS

Oh, yeah? He did it twice before. Can't afford another. Where Frank and Jackie Gleason go, they all go.

KANDU

Tell him it's a, what is the word? A gag.

TOOTS

Gag? I might gag. Some gag. Every newspaper in New York is here and The New Yorker magazine. God damn George Plimpton. Stiff Brit.

KANDU

Sir, forgive me, but what is the worst that can happen? They are not fighting each other. He is fighting someone else.

TOOTS

Not fighting each other? Who the hell knows? No one knows how this might end. He never shuts up. You had to pull remarks out of Joe Louis' mouth. They call him The Louisville Lip! That's the first reason they hate him, among a few. And the spinster. She's a recluse, whiter than your suit, and old enough to be his great-grandmother. Worse. She looks like she died in 1959. You know what my problem is, Kandu? I'm too nice a guy. Remember the

last time we brought the press in? Yogi Berra meeting my idol, the great Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway!

KANDU

Yogi Berra? The cartoon character?

TOOTS

(Shor glares at him) The New York Yankee catcher who says everything so wrong he's right.

KANDU

Oh, yes, the malaprop master. *(Holds up a fork.)* Like when he gave you directions to his house and said, 'When you see a fork in the road, take it.'

TOOTS

Yeah, the accidental genius. And remember when Charlie Chaplin made that scene, when he didn't know the secret code to get in the joint and had to wait in line because no one knows who the Hell he is without his tramp make up.

KANDU

Aah, yes. Good times. *(Smiling)* He said, "Your bland delicatessen food better be worth this long wait." And you shouted in the street, "Well, I've stood longer in line for your crummy pictures." *(Beat, without mirth)* That was fun.

TOOTS

Chaplin. Another stiff Brit.

KANDU

But, sir, they are both here to write poems, no? The written word has bound opposite cultures together forever. Perhaps they will find common ground in the written word.

TOOTS

Common ground at Toots Shor's? Like when Marilyn Monroe came in with new husband Arthur Miller and I forgot to tell her former husband Joe DiMaggio about it. What a mess! DiMaggio never came back.

KANDU

As I recall, sir, he didn't come back after you tried to make him feel better by calling her a "whore."

TOOTS

I know men! I bought that cheap bastard all his drinks! I was ringside for all the big fights, when Rocky Marciano knocked out Joe Louis. Those were fighters! This guy fights with his mouth better than his fists. He's fast but hangs with the wrong crowd. Dangerous guys. I mean, guys more dangerous than fighters? I'm surprised that no one has.... never mind.... *(Beat)* Okay, here's the deal. Here's how we are going to set it up. You walk him in. I'll walk her in. We bring the photographers in to snap a few shots. They have a quick, quiet lunch and we bring the press back in and cross our fingers. A big black cat and a tiny white mouse. What the hell could possibly go wrong? *(Shor exits)*

KANDU

(Looking offstage, his eyes growing wide, then bolting to the wings, then backing onto the stage again, bowing slightly).
Aahhhhhh. This way, please. Mr. Alley. *(Pronounced incorrectly. He puts menus on the center table, turns, no one there. Then, after a few seconds, entering, like a giant, the then heavyweight champion of the world, in his prime, age 25, tall, dark, handsome, elegantly dressed in a dark gray suit, buttoned down white shirt, dark necktie, gold wristwatch, patent leather black shoes, an incredibly impressive physical specimen, who dwarfs the waiter. Ali scans the room.)*

ALI

(Indignant) Mr. Waiter Man, it's not 'Alley.' I'm not some narrow hiding place where you put the garbage cans behind your building. It's 'A-li!' Means 'Worthy of praise. Champion.'

KANDU

(Taken aback) My apologies, sir.

ALI

(Smiling) It's all right. Just tell me your name. I'll pronounce it wrong and then forget it, and we'll be even.

KANDU

(Stating his name) Kanduu. *(pause)*

ALI

(Unsure, fidgety) Well, then do it!

KANDU

No, sir, my name. The name. It's Kandu

ALI

Oh. I'll remember that. Sounds African.

KANDU

It is sir. Its origins, and mine, are from Congo.

ALI

(Impressed) Congo? Man, what you doing here?

KANDU

Well, sir there are no Toots Shor's in Africa. Not yet anyway.

ALI

Maybe someday I'll fight in Africa. I'm the only one who could ever do it. Fight in the bushes. Get my kinfolk all stirred up. Can anyone ever imagine me defending my crown in darkest Africa? And you working in Manhattan? Man, we tip top at Toots.

KANDU

Many of my countrymen draw their strength, sir, from the man who has never accomplished something before. Maybe you should consider it. I will return shortly with the other guest. The other *(beat)* champion.

ALI

Champion?

KANDU

Poet.

ALI

Poet? What kind of poet? He better not be better than me! What am I saying? How can he be better than me!

KANDU

(Correcting) She.

ALI

She? *(Beat)* She better not be prettier than me! *(Beat)* What am I saying agin.' How could anyone be prettier than me? I'm sooo pretty. The champ HAS to be pretty!

KANDU

Hardly. You are prettier. *(Beat)* She is 80.

ALI

Eighty? In years? Is this a joke? Who is she? Why did Plimpton and Herbert Muhammad set this up?

KANDU

She is Marianne Moore. Poet Laureate of the United States. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the Bollingen Prize, the National Book Award, the National Medal for Literature, and nominated for the Nobel Prize.

ALI

(Speechless) Is that all? Slacker. *(Beat)* So, she's a real poet. Real.

KANDU

Real. And a real fighter. Like you. Now, if the poor thing can only figure out why she is here exactly and who you may be.

ALI

She's confused? Her age confuses her?

KANDU

No, sir. She is as sharp as a freshly cut lawn. The circumstances have muddled her, much like you. Frankly, sir, the two of you are above the usual, sordid.... Mr. Shor thought it would be great publicity for you, and Miss Moore, but mostly for him. Mr. Plimpton, who convinced him, will be in the back, taking notes for his book. I suspect they will both drink heavily soon after. I suspect they may have started.

(Suddenly, camera bulbs flash rapidly from the wings. Backing in, half blinded, half-crouching, and being shielded by Toots Shor himself, is a tiny, frail, bony woman with white hair in a bun and ponytail, tied in a whitish ribbon. The hair cascades down from a tri-cornered black Revolutionary War-style hat, that

has a small pin on it. She, too, is wearing a white cotton blouse, buttoned at the top, and a thin black ribbon tie. Her dress is also black as is the cape over her shoulders, which gives her a look of Quaker woman with the unusual headpiece only breaking that image. This is Marianne Moore.)

TOOTS

Don't blind the lady, you Pavlov mutts. We ain't here to abuse the elderly. Here, Miss Moore. Please sit. It's the Space Age. Haven't you dogs figured out how to take someone's picture without blinding them? *(Shor directs her to Ali's table. Ali stands out of respect, unsure. Kandu pulls out the chair. Moore, looking slowly from Shor, to Kandu to Ali, widens her already big brown eyes in wonder and anxiety, somehow seats herself.)*

ALI

Don't be alarmed, Miss Moore. You're in good hands. *(sensing her discomfort, he fluffs out the white napkin and puts it across her lap like a gentleman. She slowly looks up from his knees, at her eye level, to his head.)*

TOOTS

Champ! Welcome to Toots Shor's! A boxing heavyweight and a literary heavyweight. *(Turns to the press)* All right, you decorated canines, they are going to eat alone, then we open it up to you. Go into the lounge and have a martini. Give them privacy. *(To the pair)* We'll talk later after the magic. You can't get this shit at Sardi's! Miss Moore, what'll you have?

MOORE

(Softly) May I have warm tea, please? Is that possible?

TOOTS

Tea? Just tea? Or would you like our special tea?

MOORE

Special tea?

TOOTS

Yes, we ship it in from Long Island. In fact, it's called Long Island Tea. Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason love it! In fact, they invented it. In fact, they bottled it. In fact....

MOORE

(sharply) Too many facts. You have never written a poem, have you, Mr. Shor?

TOOTS

(Amused) Poetry? Hell, no! I'm a realist.

MOORE

Well, in fact, Mr. Shor, poetry is our most real entity. Poetry defines what is real by pointing out what is unreal and imaginary. Or creates its sister. Or makes the harshness of reality bearable. What you think is real may be a parallel dimension or you, in fact, may be the protagonist in another being's poem.

TOOTS

I am speechless.

ALI

Really? I have never experienced that.

MOORE

Speechless? That is why you are not a poet, Mr. Shor. All right, I will try your tea. But not too strong.

TOOTS

Just enough. And what lunch? *(Kandu is there to observe. He will come back silently once or twice to pour water, etc. and observe some remarks upon which to comment later.)*

MOORE

Just tea, please. *(Then suddenly)* Arugula! Esoteric Arugula!

TOOTS

Come again? Esoteric? Yeah, well it'll be a mystery if I can find some.

MOORE

You should eat more arugula.

TOOTS

Uh, no. I never eat anything that's good for me. Besides, if I do, with all that damn ruffage, they'll change my name from 'toots' to 'tooooooots.' (beat) Champ?

ALI

Oh, this is going to be so much fun. Water, please, no ice, and a bowl of bloody beef soup. (Beat) And a phone.

TOOTS

Can do. (Louder) Kandu! H2O, Queen's blood, King's blood. (He exits laughing) Let's see the sparks fly. What a pair! Beef and arugula. One whispers secrets to the moon, while the other shouts them to the sun.

(They are now alone with each other. The contrast between the pair is startling. There is an awkward silence, and nervous laughter from each. A throat is cleared. They look around the room not knowing what to say. She is quite shy with him. A solitary flash bulb goes off late. This causes her to make a confused gesture. Ali waves off the cameraman to stop and glares. She smiles and makes a pleased gesture as he nods. Kandu brings water and tea. She shakily takes a small sip. She puts the cup back on its saucer.)

MOORE

(Reacting to the tea) Ooh. What do they grow on Long Island? Unusual. Mysterious. (beat) I would estimate 70 proof. At least the last time I bottled gin for friends during Prohibition.

ALI

Surprise. Surprise!

MOORE

(Beat) How is your water?

ALI

Wet. *(Ten seconds of silence)* Nice hat.

MOORE

You like it? It's my signature these days and my comfort.

ALI

It's sharp. I can't wear hats. Never have. Head's too big.
(Beat) Is that a military hat?

MOORE

Yes. Foundationally. Its roots are within the Army.

ALI

(Looks at her) Ooh, wish you hadn't reminded me of them. Not a big fan of the Army. Not sure they are big fans of me. (Beat) What war?

MOORE

Revolutionary. (Smiles) It's a facsimile. I know it's hard to believe, but I'm not quite that old.

ALI

(Ali smiles, then after another pause) Mrs. Moore, what have you been doing lately?

MOORE

Oh. Oh. Well, I have been subduing my apartment. I have just moved in from Brooklyn to a new apartment which is strange to me and needs taming. I have not actually tamed it yet.

ALI

Is that so? Are there animals in it? (Chuckles and drinks his water.)

MOORE

No, why? Should there be?

ALI

No reason. You said, "taming." (Beat) Yes, we is tip top at Toots. (Looks away, he turns back to Miss Moore). Well, I am considering farming myself, after I stop fightin.' I'd like to sit and let the pain in my sore hands recover from all that punching. Let my head clear, looking across a river and a valley. Maybe look across my long wooden fence at the biggest bull in the world. Just sit and rock back and forth and look at him out there in the middle of the field, snorting and feeding.

MOORE

(Surprisingly carnal) Rutting! Oh yes! We'd all rut if we could. *(Ali gives her a quizzical look, smiles. She, again, though, is quite shy with him, ducking her head and peeking at him.)* When you get that farm, may I come and look with you?

ALI

(Beams) You can sit on the porch with me, Mrs. Moore. I love the smell of horses and hay and the sight of their beautiful bodies. I grew up in Kentucky. Famous for the Derby. Somehow, it inspired me to train harder so my body could be in condition like that. I'm a stallion. All the other bums are mules.

MOORE

(Looks him up top to bottom, going under the table a little to do so. Stays down a moment. We can't see what is going on, but Ali's eyes get very wide, a funny look.) Yes, if you were a horse, you would be a champion once more in the thoroughbred class. *(Smiles sincerely)* You are quite good looking. Has anyone ever mentioned that?

ALI

(Smiling) Once or twice.

MOORE

I have lived eight decades and no one has ever told me that. I longed to hear it, just once. Even if it was insincere. Relish it each time you hear it. *(Beat)* I know it is surface vanity and temporal, but it changes a life. I must ask then, why do you do something which will, whose very goal it is, to ultimately make you ugly?

ALI

(Shrugs) No worries. They have to hit me to do that. No one has yet. It's just a job. Grass grows, birds fly, waves pound the sand. I beat people up

MOORE

Well, Mr. Ali, there are many more pleasant things to do than beating people up.

ALI

Yes, but I believe in the 'eye-for-an-eye business.' I'm no cheek-turner. You come at me, I come at you. You kill my cat, better hide your dog. Then again, I'm young. I'm fast. I can't possibly be beat.

MOORE

(Taking it all in) Well, I'm old. I'm plain. And I'm blocked occasionally. That's why I ordered the arugula.

ALI

(Pause, surprised). Whaatt? Not those cheeks, Mrs. Moore! *(He rolls his eyes, pats his pretty face.)* You can baffle!

MOORE

I can baffle? Oh. That is revelatory. *(Pauses to reflect)* And this might be. The Christian you once were preached cheek turning in a crisis. The Black Muslim you are, preaches something else, something akin to what you do for a living. *(Ali squints at her.)*

ALI

(unsure) What you saying?

MOORE

My grandfather, John Riddle Warner, was a Presbyterian pastor and preacher. I remain a devoted Presbyterian, and I approach my Christian faith as a lesson in strength vindicated through trials and temptations. My poems often deal with themes of strength and adversity, but the Almighty now punches for me. In my mind, it is not possible to live without religious faith. It is death before death.

ALI

Oooooeee, you smarter than you look! That little frame holds a mighty big brain! I have faith. I serve God. I pray five times a day. That's why I need the phone. *(Smiles, whispers)* But I'm still sortin' it out, Mrs. Moore, still grapplin' over whether you are all white devils, like I was taught by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, present company excluded. *(She gulps her tea.)*

MOORE

White devils? I thought devils were red. White angels, yes. If you are consorting through devils, I don't think you have found peace.

ALI

Well, when you can whup any man in the world, but they still tryin' to whup you, you never know peace. Next man up. Still sortin' it out. But my toughest fight wasn't in no ring. My toughest fight was with my first wife. *(Beat, rolls his eyes.)* Do you and your husband fight?

MOORE

(Forlorn) I never married. I live alone. I have always lived alone.

ALI

That's good, too. *(Beat, teasing)* So, your apartment ain't the only thing 'untamed.' *(Winks, she blushes a bit)* Yes, sir, mighty big brain. *(She is like a schoolgirl for a moment.)*

MOORE

I met two heavyweight champions once. Rocky Marciano and Floyd Patterson, both in New York. Nice fellows. Not as impressive as you. They were humble.

ALI

It's hard to be humble, when you're as great as I am. *(Ali laughs.)* I whipped Patterson and would chop up Marciano. Rocky wasn't a great fighter scientifically, just a mauler and a brawler. One fight his nose is hanging off him, and he kept coming. Can't put him down. Can't teach people to fight like Marciano. He was courageous. He wasn't as great as me, wasn't as beautiful, but I don't know that I would've beaten him like that. Those Italian boys make great fighters, and they're the only kind of whites who aren't afraid to fight the brothers. *(beat)* I'm just playin.' My way of joking is to tell the truth. That's the funniest joke in the world. The world ought to learn that. It needs to do more truth-telling, don't you think Miss Moore?

MOORE

Yes. That's why I'm a poet. It's my truth. Clear direct words are truth. So is your jab. For a boxer, a jab is truth, is it not?

ALI

(Impressed) Yes, it is! A jab is straight and to the point of the nose, like a summons to become real. I once fought a guy named Moore, Archie Moore. Strong, old, black guy. Former champion. Fu Manchu mustache. Older than dirt. He's 50 and still fighting. *(Beat)* Are you related?

MOORE

I don't think so. Why is there a resemblance?

ALI

(Ali shakes his head) I gave him an extra whupping because he was my first professional manager. I show up to camp and he says, "Sweep the floor! Wash the windows!" and I said, "I'm going to be heavyweight champion of the world. I ain't sweeping floors." He said, "You aren't humble enough." I didn't stay two weeks. Then, I got to knock him out. That fight made me even more famous than I was. I got famous for calling the round.

MOORE

Calling the round?

ALI

Predicting what round my opponent would go down! Not only do I knock 'em out, Mrs. Moore, I pick the round. I did it three times in a row, early in my career, then came Archie Moore and that was my first famous poem: *(Shouts)* "Listen, chumps I know the score! Archie Moore will fall in four!"

MOORE

And did he?

ALI

Yes, ma'am. I made sure of it. Like you read about. *(Makes a fist, a clicking sound with his tongue and points down.)* I could have stopped him in three, but I wanted to make my prediction look good.

MOORE

Oh, I see. But what if his name didn't rhyme with a number between one and ten?

ALI

(Thinks a second) Then, the press would have a field day 'cause I didn't knock him out like I predicted. It would go to a decision, and they'd write, 'Clay and Moore was not a war, It turned out to be a great big bore!' That happened once with Doug Jones. I said I'd stop him in four, then six, but it went the full ten.

MOORE

Oh, I see. When you missed your prediction, how did you explain it?

ALI

I told the public that four plus six equaled ten. *(Winks)*

MOORE

(Amused and confused) Clay, you said? Clay and Moore?

ALI

Yes. That was my name until I became a man. *(Beat)* I changed it the night I whupped the Big Bear Sonny Liston in Miami three years ago.

MOORE

Yes! Now, I remember. You joined the Nation of Islam. They ostracize you. You had a beautiful name. A historical name. Cassius Marcellus Clay. Your name was poetry.

ALI

Yes, ma'am, sounded lovely. My father named me after hisself. I'm Cassius Clay Junior. My sweet mother was sad, and my father angry when I changed it. But it wasn't my name. It wasn't HIS name. It was another man's name, a slave name. I didn't choose it, and I don't want. It. Was the name of a Kentucky landowner, a planter.

MOORE

Mr. Ali, I am from Missouri. The Show-Me-State. I know who Clay was. Are you aware, however, that he became an abolitionist? That he freed his own slaves. That he fought for decades to free all the slaves.

ALI

(Beat) Well, he may have gotten rid of his slaves, but he held onto white supremacy. Think about it, Miss Moore. Why should I keep my white slave master's name visible and my black ancestors invisible, unknown, dishonored? My mother is high yella.

MOORE

I am sorry. She is what? High yella?

ALI

That's what we call light skinned black women in the South. It means somewhere in the last 300 years a white man or two raped my mother's ancestors when they was his slaves. Like that was somehow their fault. My opponents still do mention it.

MOORE

(incredulous) They mention your mother's mother's rape?

ALI

They are darker than me. They look at me, different from the really dark Negroes and call me "half breed" to get under my beautiful skin.

MOORE

(Long awkward pause). Well, we may write something actual here today, Mr. Ali. We may write something of great worth. *(beat)* So, you left your Baptist world in Kentucky and joined a militant, even radical, group who want to take people like me down. *(Asks for clarification)* Down, right? That's the colloquial phrase, 'Take you down?'

ALI

I did. *(Beat)* I did not.

MOORE

(Stares, confused) You did. You did not. *(Beat)* Well, they told me you were a walking contradiction.

ALI

I *did* leave my Christian roots and join the Black Muslims. I did NOT want to take people like you down. Since I was a little kid, policemen, managers, promoters, trainers, other fighters, pastors, leaders of movements, even Malcolm X, all telling me what to do. I am 25 now. At first, they told me to. I am learning how to think for myself.

MOORE

That takes even more courage than boxing, I believe. And that first night as champion you became Mr. Ali. That was the launch.

ALI

No.

MOORE

(More confused) No?

ALI

That was the next night.

MOORE

The next night? What was your name for the first 24 hours?

ALI

Cassius X.

MOORE

X? Like Malcolm X?

ALI

Allah rest him. Allah rest Malcolm. Wasn't right what they did to Malcolm. What they did to Malcolm, they threaten to do to me. Still sortin' it out.

MOORE

So, you then decided it wasn't a very good idea to have a letter for a last name?

ALI

Well, you become what you dream. You become what you name. I didn't want to be an 'X' champion. *(She giggles, he giggles.)* See, what I did there?

MOORE

Yes!

ALI

You're cute.

MOORE

(Flustered) So, are you. Relish that, like I do this splendid tea! *(Kandu brings the beef soup, places it in front of Ali. He is out of breath. He takes a huge bunch of arugula still with the grocery store wrapping tags on them and sets it in front of Mrs. Moore.)*

KANDU

Mrs. Moore, this is grocery store fresh. I brought you scissors. *(Beat)* Are you certain I cannot bring you anything else from the kitchen?

MOORE

Thank you, no, I'm feeding on dreams. And my pet deer will love this later.

ALI

I thought you said you didn't have any animals in your apartment.

MOORE

Who said they were in my apartment? *(winks)*

KANDU

(Nods) Very well. I go to feed another herd. They are Republicans. *(Exits.)*

ALI

Feed on dreams? Dreams. The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up. Except Ernie Terrell.

MOORE

The man you fight next. I read an article where he said he had a dream he would defeat you easily.

ALI

(Incredulous) What? If he even dreamed about beating me, he should wake up and apologize. You better pray for him. He keeps calling me "Clay." I'm going to hit him, pop, pop, pop and shout, "What's my name?" While I'm doing it! Every round. Punish him.

MOORE

Oh dear. Let's not be grim. *(Beat)* I see photos on the wall here of other boxers, other champions. Joe Louis, Jack Dempsey. These were the greatest fighters in my life.

ALI

They were!

MOORE

Do you suspect you could defeat them as well?

ALI

(Glares) I am the astronaut of boxing. Joe Louis and Dempsey were wingless birds. *(Beat)* I am a poet, too. That must make me the double Greatest.

MOORE

Yes. Thus, my invitation.

ALI

They tell me you are greatest poetess in the country. So, that's why the two of us should produce something together.

MOORE

A sonnet?

ALI

Of course. A sonnet? I'm on it!

MOORE

I see what you did there. Couplets.

ALI

What's that mean?

MOORE

We each take a line and make it work, work through it, rewrite it, preliminaries, like those bouts they fight before you fight in the main event.

ALI

Preliminaries? Ain't got time for no rewrites. We got a dozen newspapers here with photographers. We must invent this on the spot!

MOORE

(Suddenly flustered) Oh, my! But, Mr. Ali, I take my time with poetry. I ruminate over poems. Germinate. It can take weeks to pen one line. I am afraid I am no longer spontaneous.

ALI

Thus, the arugula. Don't you worry, Miss Moore, I am! I once wrote the world's' greatest and shortest poem.

MOORE

(Still little dazed at this prospect) Oh, really. How did it go?

ALI

(Loud) Whee! Me! *(They both laugh heartily)*

MOORE

What is this opponent like? Is Mr. Terrell a short man?

ALI

No, ma'am very tall. Taller than me. Six-six.

MOORE

Six-six? Giants! You are both giants. Is he a Negro like you?

ALI

(Beat) Ma'am, No one is a Negro like me. Aint' never been a Negro like me. I broke the mold. But, yeah, he's colored. *(Shows him Terrell's photo which he pulls out of his pocket.)*

MOORE

(Studying it) He is intimidating. Rougher on the edges. Are you never frightened of such men?

ALI

Let me tell you a secret, Miss Moore. White folk are much more scared of big black men than black folk are of big black men.
(Toots Shor re-enters, along with Kandou.)

MOORE

Why do you carry his photo around?

ALI

Getting it ready for the obituary column.

TOOTS

(Enters) All cozy and tight. Better than planned. Are you ready, Mrs. Moore? I see you haven't penetrated your arugula.

MOORE

(surprisingly) Mr. Shor, bring those suckers in. *(Ali laughs for the ages.)*

TOOTS

I'll put bells on them. *(Exits with Kandou, a couple of flashbulbs go off. Ali rises. Mrs. Moore gulps her tea.)*

ALI

(To the audience which serves as the 'audience' of the press.)
Now, gather round here. Make sure the cameras are working, the film is working, the microphones are on. Don't want no excuses. This is BIG! Miss Marianne Moore, poet, and don't I know it, and I are going to write a sonnet about my upcoming fight in Houston with Ernie Terrell. Miss Moore and I will show the world with this great poem who is who and what is what and who is going to win. I've wrestled with alligators. I've tussled with a whale. I done handcuffed lightning. And thrown thunder in jail.

MOORE

(Suddenly rising like the Phoenix, eyes wide, brimming with confidence and power, announcing.) We will call it, 'A Poem on

the Annihilation of Ernie Terrell.' Let us be serious but not grim.

ALI

(To the room) She's cute. (Kandu enters hurriedly with a pen and a menu for Ali to write on. They ponder for a moment, then Ali starts off with half the first line. In thought.) Now. I really don't know why we had to have the two best poets in the world here, Ms. Moore and me, to immortalize this bum. Let's look at his record of opponents. Andy Bond. Bum! Ted Poole! Bum! Vernon Clay...Clay? He might be good...But you came for show, so, here we go: "After we defeat" - *(He stage whispers to write in Ernie Terrell)... 'Ernie Ter-rell.'* *(She writes in a spidery script and misspells it).*

MOORE

T-y-r?

ALI

T-e-r and 'Ell.' *(To the crowd)* Just getting her pen warmed up. *(She finishes).* Good! *(Then shouts and writes simultaneously)* He will catch nothing.... *(He hands the pen over to her, expecting her to fill in the obvious rhyme. She makes some scratchy squiggles on the paper to get the ink flowing properly. The fighter peers over her shoulder, surprised she has not jumped on the rhyme he expects. To her, softer.)* Nothing....but....What's that say?

MOORE

It doesn't say anything. You could call them more 'preliminaries.' *(Then, tentatively)* Terrell should rhyme nicely with 'bell.' *(Finally, Ali leans over and whispers to her)*

ALI

No... 'But hell,' Mrs. Moore.' Nothing, but...

MOORE

Oh yes. Yes. *(She writes down, 'but hell,' then wrestles with it some more, clucking gently, and murmuring about the rhythm of the line, crosses it out boldly and substitutes, to Ali's chagrin, reading aloud and unexpected fighter force.)* 'He will get nothing, nothing but hell!' *(Taking everyone back, as she wallows in this gladiator realm, a warrior's smile.)*

ALI

(Writing) Terrell was big and ugly and tall! *(Looks at her expectantly)*

MOORE

(Scrawls, then wide eyed) But when he fights Ali, he will lose his elasticity and wherewithal! *(Gently shakes his head "No.")* Too heady or obtuse? *(Ali whispers another clue.)* Better... because you recite this aloud. "When he fights you..."

ALI

...*me*... when he fights me...

MOORE

When he fights me, he is sure... to... fall. *(Smiles for his approval).*

ALI

(Writing) Now, let's see... *(Beat)* If he criticizes this poem by me and Miss Moore...

MOORE

(Writing, the light of an idea). If he was in earnest, he might be formidable like Lysander of Sparta, but he is an 'Ernie' so he will need an attorney! *(Ali stares but can't get angry. Whispers to her.)*

ALI

Maybe I should take over...enough damn lawyers in here.

MOORE

(Sips more of her tea, then suddenly) 'He will be STRETCHED out on a gurney!!!

ALI

(Alive again, pleased) Ernie on a gurney! Call his attorney! Moving on, *(Writes)* 'He is claiming to be the real heavyweight champ...

MOORE

(In rhythm now) But when the fight starts...

ALI

...He will look like a tramp.'

MOORE

(Rising) "In the firmament, pocked stars like Orion, with the wilting muscles of a weakened lion!

ALI

(Shakes his head gently 'No.') That was Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams. Knocked him out in three rounds. Toots Shor, what did you put in that tea? *(Now, the big finish, writing)* "He has been talking too much about me and making me sore...

ALI

After I am through with him, *(Together, she, following his mouth, a half second behind)* he will...

MOORE

... he will...

ALI

...not be able

MOORE

...not be able...

ALI

...to even challenge Mrs. Moore!'

MOORE

(Loud, in the grips of tea.) Because that chopped Redwood will be on the floor! Hollowed out like a tree to its core! *(beat)* To find him, they will need ship-to-shore! He will be out before the count of four! *(She applauds despite herself. Buzz in the room.)*

ALI

I think that's enough.

MOORE

(DELIGHTED) Oh, I have never ever enjoyed being part of doggerel so much.

ALI

(Taken aback) What did you call me, Miss Moore?

MOORE

Doggerel. Not a pet. It's what they call good bad poetry. Like limericks or unfinished sonnets or... what we just did.

TOOTS

(Entering from the wings) Okay, okay....Speaking of dogs, there you go, ya fourth estate Rottweilers. That's front-page news. The heavyweight champion of the world and the literary champion of that same world, combine to pen a poem on the annihilation of Ernie Terrell at a table for tea for two at Toots Shor's! Now, that's enough, boys, that's enough. Kandou, make sure you copy that poem on a dozen menus and hand them out in the streets. Yes, sir. We got poetry on the menu at Toots. We're going to frame it. Collector's items. Try to get that shit at Sardi's!
(He gathers the menu.)

ALI

(Ali chortles that deep chortle of his.) You is famous, Miss Moore. Let me correct that. Famouser. *(He pulls out a small piece of paper and dials the number slowly on the rotary phone he was given.)* Excuse me, one moment. *(Phone rings five times.)* Yes, Herbert. It went well. Very well. Every paper in New York was here. Don't worry. I still got two weeks yet. Angelo always worries. I'll be in Houston summarily. *(Mood change)* Who showed up? Carrying what? They served you? Can they do that? Well, get the ball rolling, Herbert. You my manager. This is my eighth title defense in two years. I cain't fight everybody. I can't fight them inside and out! Get our attorney. Tell him, if he don't get me out of this, I'll put him on a gurney *(Turns and winks at Moore, who blushes. Hangs up the phone, grimly. Shaken up, he stands and walks over the table and sits with Miss Moore.)*

MOORE

Mr. Ali, is everything all right?

ALI

I called my manager, Herbert Muhammad. He's worried I won't get to training camp in time in Houston. Wants me to stop playing in winter in New York with the New York press.

MOORE

I thought you wanted press.

ALI

Not this kind. You see, Mrs. Moore, your good friends, the U.S. Army, paid a visit. They have papers they wanted to serve because they want me to serve.

MOORE

They want you? They want to draft the heavyweight champion of the world for, Oh Lord, that awful war in Vietnam? You? Of all people! When?

ALI

They want me on a plate, Miss Moore. They don't like my politics or my friends or my religion. This has been going on for years. I had to register for the military when I was nothin,' a teenager in Louisville. I was 17. Hadn't even fought in the Olympics yet. April 1960. I took a test. Failed it. Wasn't never a good student.

MOORE

You failed the intelligence test for the U.S. Army?

ALI

Well, I said I was 'The Greatest' not 'The Smartest.' (Moore giggles) I was classified 4F. I was classified 4F all the time I was a Christian. A couple of years later, when I was hanging around with my Muslim brothers and got loud about how this country called me a champion but won't serve me in white restaurants, won't let me drink out of the same water fountains as them....make me sit on the back of the bus...well, I got louder and louder and the funniest thing. Without takin' no new test, just like that, I was classified 1A. Ready to go to the jungle. And they want to talk about that.

MOORE

Surely, they wouldn't. They couldn't. You are the world's...

ALI

They done it to Joe Louis. Sugar Ray Robinson. A thousand others. Most of the soldiers they send to that Hell are Negroes. Press don't cover that.

MOORE

That was World War II. Necessary. Not this Asian travesty. Surely, they will make an exception for you.

ALI

This country ain't ready yet to make exceptions for me or my kind. If I caused a scene outside in the streets of this city and weren't no champ, they'd hose me down and set the dogs on me.

MOORE

Politicians! *(Beat)* Will they have Army uniforms big enough for you?

ALI

I'm sure they will, Miss Moore. They'll make them special. Probably put glitter on them so the Viet Cong can see me in the jungle. They'll make sure of that. But I won't go.

MOORE

Won't go?

ALI

I'm brown, Miss Moore. Those people are brown. I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong. No Viet Cong ever called me 'Nigger.'" *(This hangs in the air.)* I'm not ready to fight. I'm not ready to kil. I'm not ready to die. Not over there. I'll die in the U.S.

MOORE

Oh, dear. They will brand you 'coward.' They will strip you. They will jail you. They might even shoo--- *(pause)*

ALI

As I said, I'm ready to fight and die. Here.

KANDU

(Enters) May I get you anything else, madam, sir? Aspirin? A hammock? Nunchuks?

ALI

No, thank you, Kandu. My man, Kandu...another fine brown man.

KANDU

Mr. Ali, if I may say, most of the patrons who enter here don't speak with me, except to order or complain or order *and* complain. You have treated me like your own. I thank you, sir.

ALI

Well, Kandu, I don't trust anyone who is nice to me, but rude to the waiter. Because they would treat me the same way if I was in that position. Service to others here on earth is the rent we pay for our room in heaven.

KANDU

(Bows a regal bow to him. Ali walks over and hugs him. Kandu is glorified.)

TOOTS

(Enters loudly, nervous) Kandu, Jackie Gleason just bounced in. Wants his special tea. Chop, chop! *(Kandu looks at Ali knowingly at this condescending command, his point made, turns and leaves.)*

MOORE

(Her hair falling down slightly, a little disheveled.) Oh, Mr. Shor, can you escort me over to him? I really must ask him what he puts in his Long Island tea...

TOOTS

Of course! I'll take you to the bar first and just show you the bottle. You sure you want to know? Champ, are you coming?

MOORE

Just give us one moment, please. The Army has recruited at your tables.

TOOTS

The Army? Calling? Sure! *(Beat)* You ain't gonna pull that conscientious objector crap are you? Religion of peace?

ALI

(long stare) I ain't no draft dodger. I won't go to Canada. But I ain't going 10,000 miles to kill poor brown folks. I won't fight.

TOOTS

Hah, a fighter that don't want to fight! That's what we are coming to. A fighter who won't fight for his country. You'll go to jail.

ALI

We been in jail 400 years. No different.

TOOTS

When it's your time to go, it's your fucking time to go, Champ. Whether you are in a rice paddy, or dodging hooks in the ring from Sonny Liston or just sitting in front of your house peeling potatoes to feed your family. You never know! Never! There's a time and a place.

ALI

Allah will choose the time. I ain't letting no boys in Washington choose the place.

MOORE

Mr. Shor, choose your words carefully. When the time comes, stallions can outrun rutting bulls. (*Awkward pause as the men stare.*)

TOOTS

Until any shit goes down, I'm right behind your bull. You're still tiptop at Toots. Okay, don't fight in Viet Nam. They can't sell tickets! Next time, fight in New York, okay?

ALI

I am. March 22, Zora Folley, Madison Square Garden. It's set.

TOOTS

If you beat Terrell. (*Ali glares*)

MOORE

Don't worry, Mr. Shor. His opponent's name is 'Folley.' The man has no chance. (*Ali laughs, breaks the tension.*)

TOOTS

Not the day any of us expected. I need a cigarette and a shot. (*Toot exits.*)

MOORE

(trying to lighten mood) Can the champ be beat by Folley?

ALI

No, by golly!

MOORE

Not Muhammad Al-i! *(They both laugh. Ten-second pause. Kandu walks back in.)*

ALI

Kandu, why your boss get so angry like that?

KANDU

You just got real poetry. Real. I apologize for Mr. Shor. His father died suddenly when he was four. His mother was his world. Then, one hot summer day, she just was peeling potatoes on the steps of the brownstone they lived in, in the Bronx, when a truck driver lost control and killed her. He saw the peeler in her outstretched clenched hand. He was 14. When the cooks here peeled potatoes, he could not watch. In fact, a while back, he stopped serving them completely. Time and place. That is also why he emulates the lives of famous men like Sinatra and Gleason and Hemingway, who think a cigarette and a whiskey and a blond on each arm will stave off death, rather than cause it. He is uncomfortable around women of class and elegance and intelligence like Marianne Moore. *(exits)*

MOORE

(Pause. Turns to Ali seriously.) Thank you Kandu. *(he bows and exits.)* I wrote a poem called 'Silence' once. It mentions those who may be robbed of speech, delightful speech taken away from them. Have you ever been truly silent?

ALI

Silent? Me? As I said, ma'am, I pray five times a day. I'm quiet then. But I can't shut my mouth the rest of the time. It's impossible! You saw. I have too much to say! A rooster crows only when it sees the light. Put him in the dark and he'll never crow.

MOORE

Do you mean talking about social issues, talking just to talk, to make jokes and doggerel? Worst of all, to hear yourself talk?

ALI

All of it. Maybe. You only heard me a moment, Miss Moore. (*Fully animated*) I'm the greatest talker of all times! I'm the double greatest, fighter and poet, boxer and talker! I bring the game to life! I cain't never be silent! Who would ever believe such a thing, Miss Moore! Silence? What fighters or punches could possibly ever silence me?

MOORE

(*Long pause*) My father also used to tell me, and I agree, that the deepest feelings raise themselves in silence, Mr. Ali. In silence. Someday, after the camera bulbs stop and the press sheath their pens. When you are rocking back and forth in that creaking stalactite chair on that old Kentucky farm you crave, watching the bull rut and the horses flex their veiny thighs in the silence of the noonday sun or the winter curls, relish the choice of not talking too much, my new friend. But only if it's a choice. Only if it is never forced upon you. Don't ever let them force you not to speak. Arenas are very loud. (*She pats him.*) Wars are even louder. Haters are loudest of all. Our minds were never meant, I fear, to harness their wretched noise. Don't die or go mute before you guide the rutting bulls on that farm. Promise?

ALI

If ever comes a day, impossible as it may be, Miss Moore, when I am silenced, I promise I will. (*Beat, turns*) That really is a very nice hat. Oh, one more thing. And I mean this most sincerely. You are a very beautiful woman! (*She gasps at the longed-for compliment. They freeze, slow blackout*).

MARIANNE MOORE'S VOICEOVER IN THE DARK:

*My father used to say,
"Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow's grave
or the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self-reliant like the cat—
that takes its prey to privacy,*

*the mouse's limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth—
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them.
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint.
Nor was he insincere in saying, "Make my house your inn."
Inns are not residences.
It is for the poet to create imaginary gardens with real toads
in them.*

CURTAIN