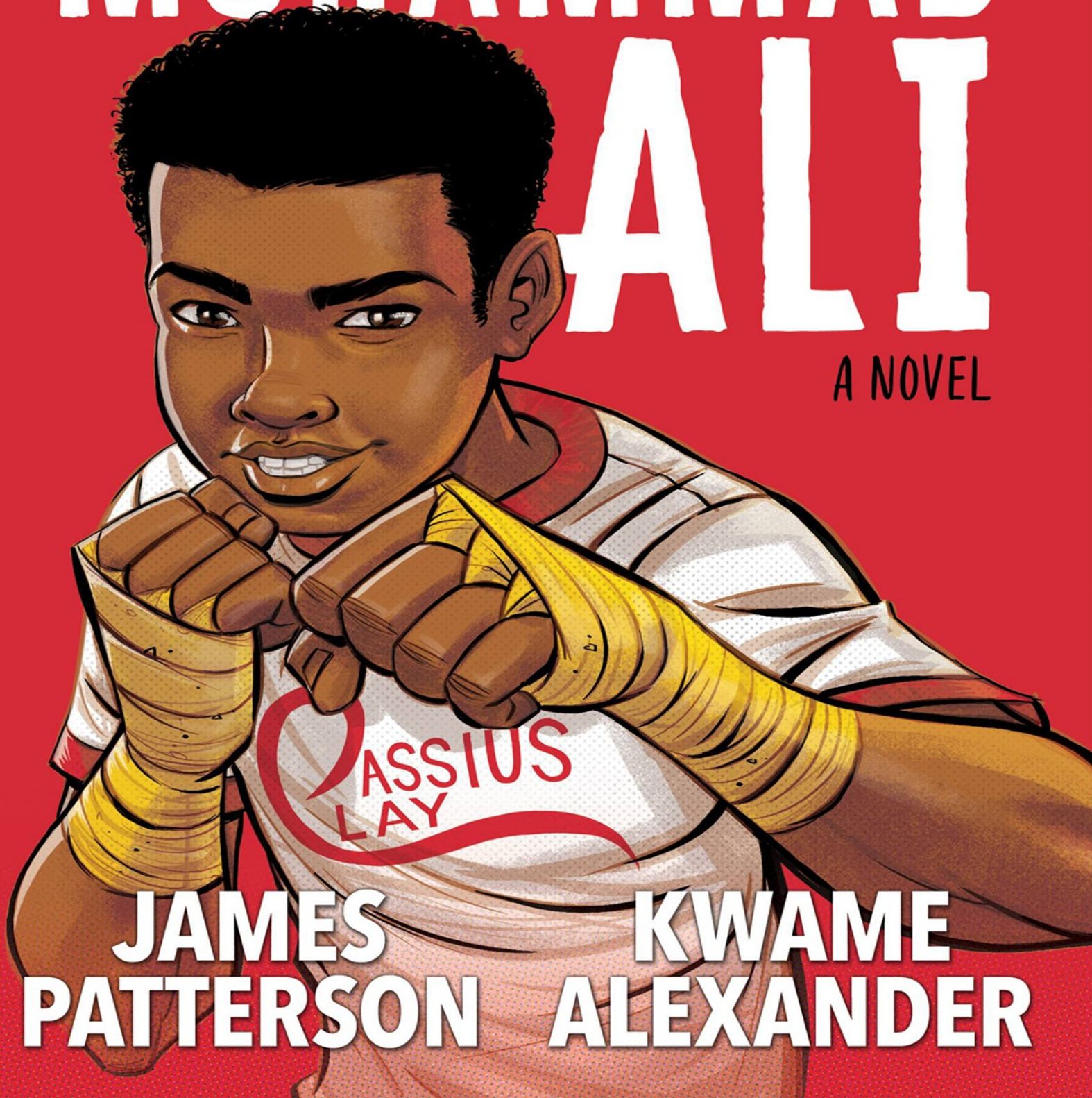


BEFORE HE WAS MUHAMMAD ALI, HE WAS CASSIUS CLAY.

# BECOMING MUHAMMAD ALI

A NOVEL



JAMES PATTERTON      KWAME ALEXANDER

# BECOMING MUHAMMAD ALI

A NOVEL

**JAMES PATTERSON AND KWAME ALEXANDER**

Illustrated by Dawud Anyabwile



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*For Odessa Clay and Cassius Clay Sr.*

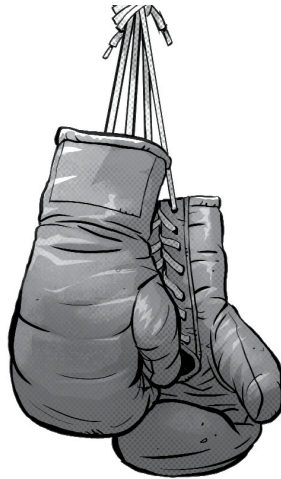
*For Randy*

*Gratitude, old chap, for constantly reminding me to be  
my best self... and to drink lots of water—K.A.*



*The wonders and woes  
in this novel are true...  
or based on truth  
and real things...  
that happened  
to real people...  
or real people  
we imagined...  
to be true...  
for real.*

# ROUND ONE



I remember *everything*. You probably would have too. That night was a piece of American history.

The Clay family phone was dusky black with a rotary dial, and it sat on a wooden table in the neat-as-a-pin living room of the little house on Grand Avenue in Louisville, Kentucky.

Some twenty of us were crammed like sardines into the room, waiting for that phone to ring.

*Waiting. Waiting. Waiting for Cassius to call home.*

It was a February night in 1958. And I remember it like it was *yesterday*.

My best friend, Cassius, was three hundred miles north in Chicago, and that night he was fighting for a championship in the Golden Gloves boxing tournament.

Cassius wasn't a professional yet, just an amateur. Tall, but a little skinny, and a lot raw. Only sixteen years old, like me.



I'm Lucius, by the way. Nice to meet you. You can call me Lucky. All my friends do.

Cassius had already won plenty of bouts all over Kentucky. But the Chicago Golden Gloves was the big time.

When he won there—and we all knew he would—it would be lights out! From now on, people everywhere would know the name Cassius Clay.

*And so we waited for the phone to ring.*

I remember that living room was so packed with family and friends and neighbors that we could hardly move! The smell of roast chicken and sweet potato pie and cheese grits mixed with the smell of paint and turpentine. Mr. Clay, Cassius's dad, who everybody called *Cash*, was a sign and billboard painter, and he kept his work supplies right there in the house.

"Mrs. Clay!" somebody called out. "When that boy of yours gets famous, he ought to buy you a bigger house!"

"Oh, you know he will!" she answered. Then she looked right at me. "Isn't that right, Lucius?"

"Yes, ma'am, you know it is. Cassius promised you a big house!"

I remember that Mrs. Clay was too nervous to eat. But she wasn't too nervous to talk about how proud she was!

"My Cassius did everything early!" she was saying to a group of ladies. "He crawled early, talked early, walked early—walked on his *toes* like a dancer."

The ladies all laughed—as if they hadn't heard that story a hundred times before. But Mrs. Clay just couldn't help it. Cassius always told her he was bound to be the greatest—with a capital *G*—and she believed it with all her heart.

So did I.

So did everybody in Louisville's West End.

*C'mon, phone. Ring, phone, ring-a-ding-ding.*

The men and boys around the room—including Cassius's little brother, Rudy—looked at one another with big grins and made punching motions with their fists. The big fight should be over by now. Under those bright lights in the middle of that huge Chicago Stadium, Cassius would be standing tall in the ring with one hand over his head like always—his opponent next to him with head bowed down in defeat.

Then the phone rang.



It was Cassius with news about the fight. And he told it like only Cassius could tell a story...

## Before the Fight

a reporter asked me  
if I thought  
I was as good  
as Joe Louis  
or Sugar Ray was  
at my age  
and I told him,  
I don't think  
I'm as good,  
I'M BETTER.  
Got more FLOW  
than Joe,  
more SLAY  
than Ray.  
I'm sweeter,  
stronger,  
and faster.  
As a matter of fact,  
I'm so fast

I can't even catch

MYSELF.

# Cassius Clay vs. Alex Watt

FEBRUARY 24, 1958

Here's how it all went down:

The bell rang  
in Chicago Stadium  
and I could barely see  
the lightweight rush me  
through the rank cigar smoke  
that filled the arena.

In the first round,  
he threw punches  
like pitches,  
fast and straight,  
striking air  
and striking out.

So, I played *peek-a-boo*  
in the second,  
sending quick jabs  
to his head.

You ain't ready for Cassius, I whispered.

Then I shook him up  
with a left  
and took him down hard  
in the third.

He sho' wasn't ready.  
But neither was I,  
when I found out  
who I was fighting  
next.



# Cassius Clay vs. Francis Turley

FEBRUARY 25, 1958

Frank Turley  
was a cowboy  
from Montana,  
meaner-looking  
than an angry ox,  
with fists  
even meaner.

They said  
he broke a guy's nose  
with a left jab,  
then smiled  
when the joker  
went tumbling  
outta the ring,  
blood spurting  
everywhichaway.

*I'ma lick you good, boss,* he said,  
winking at me  
before the bell rang, and  
I believed  
that he believed  
he would.

# Knockout

We traded punches  
like baseball cards.

Him, a wild mustang.  
Me, a Louisville slugger.

Back and forth,  
left and right,

rough  
and rugged, till

he cornered me  
with two lucky shots

to the jaw  
that felt like kicks

from a mule  
and sent me tumbling

to the mat, wondering  
if I should just stay there.

# Long Count

*One...*

While I lay there,  
the referee standing  
over me, counting  
to ten  
to see if I could get up,  
I wished my father  
was sitting ringside  
shouting my name.

*Two...*

I thought about home,  
about 3302 Grand Avenue,  
and playing football  
in the backyard  
with Rudy, and

*Three...*

the Montgomery kids next door  
and who was gonna babysit them  
now that I was a boxer,

*Four...*

and whether Lucky  
bought the new Superman  
like he promised.

*Five...*

I thought about  
my granddaddy Herman's story  
about Tom the Slave.

*Six...*

I thought about  
how boxing  
was gonna set me free,  
set us all free, and

*Seven...*

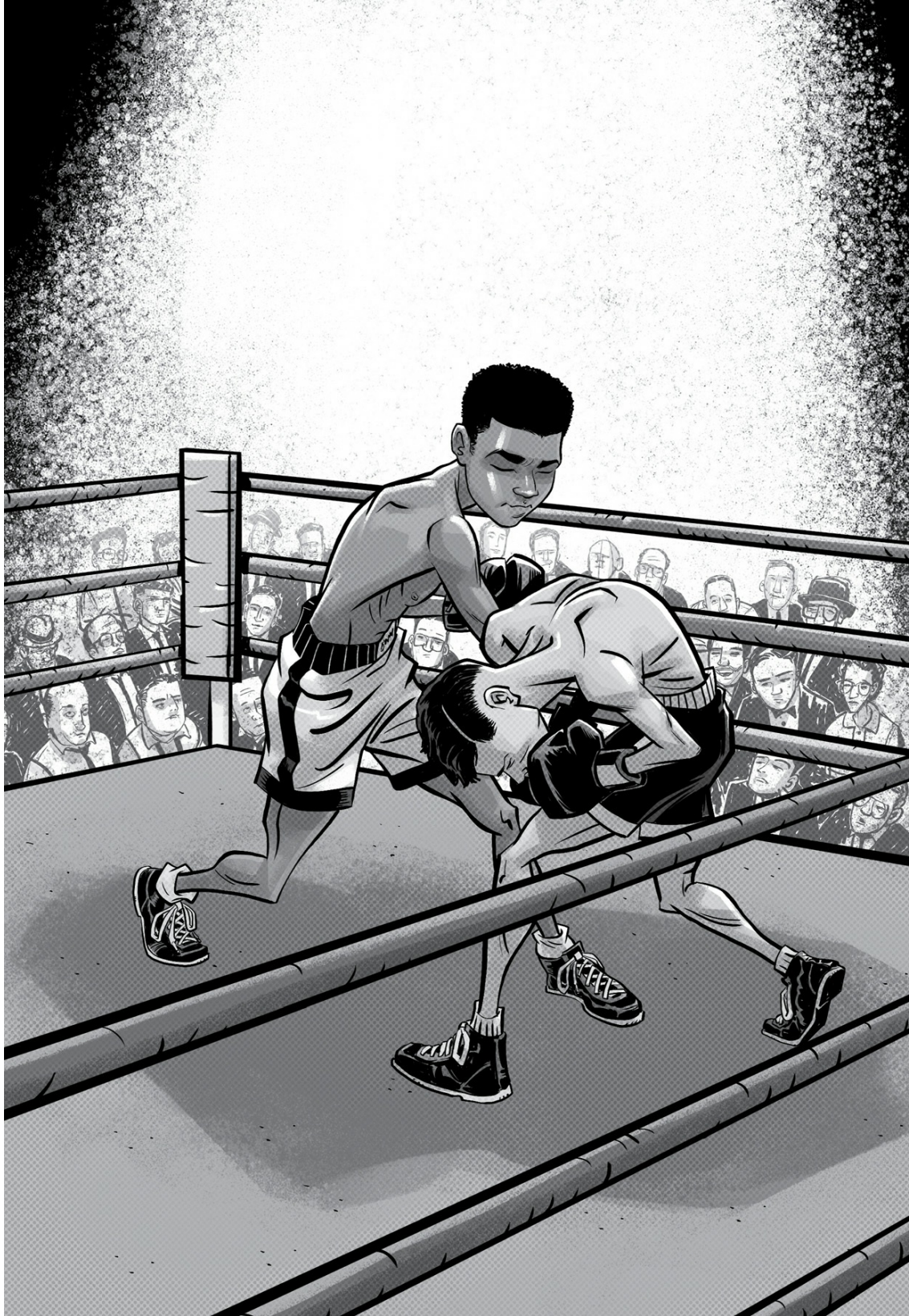
what I'd ask Momma Bird  
to cook  
for my celebration  
dinner  
after I got up and

*Eight...*

whipped this cowboy  
from Montana  
and advanced  
to the semi-finals  
of the 1958 Golden Gloves Championship.

## Celebration Dinner Menu

Two orders of veal  
Three slices of white bread  
A bowl of cornbread dressing  
One large green salad  
A bowl of chili  
Scrambled eggs  
Cheese grits  
Baked chicken with baked potato  
Two pieces of pecan pie  
Five scoops of strawberry ice cream, and  
A great big ol' glass  
of OJ.



# I Jumped Up On

*Nine...*

and Frank kept swinging  
like a lumberjack  
trying to knock down  
a tree  
but I kept standing,  
kept sticking,  
kept moving  
like a mighty wind  
till the final bell rang  
and the judges  
unanimously called out  
my name  
for the win.

# Cassius Clay vs. Kent Green

FEBRUARY 26, 1958: GOLDEN GLOVES SEMIFINALS

I was a little weary  
from hanging out  
the night before  
but that didn't shake  
my confidence  
when I stepped  
into the ring,  
gliding like a bomber jet  
and launching punches  
like missiles.

Thing was, Kent Green  
was a tank  
and he just brushed off  
my attack  
like you would  
a pesky fly  
at a picnic.

The evening newspaper read:

*The sixteen-year-old pugilist  
from Louisville  
with his quick feet  
and a loud mouth  
showed promise  
in his first two fights  
but got outboxed*



*by the older,  
more seasoned,  
hard-punching  
Kent Green.*

## On the Phone with Lucky

I might have lost  
but I'm still boss.  
I lost my stride  
but not my pride.  
I'm still here, and yeah,  
I'm comin' home

but this dream I got  
is set in stone:

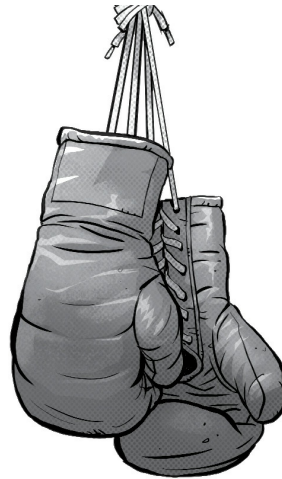
To be the best  
in the hemisphere.  
To win the Golden Gloves  
next year.

How do I know?

'Cause Cassius is courageous,  
tenacious,  
and one day  
he'll be  
the greatest.

You hear that, Lucky?  
I'm coming home.

## ROUND TWO



Maybe he *didn't* win the Golden Gloves championship in Chicago that year—but my friend Cassius was still bound for greatness. He just *knew* it. And I knew it too. To tell the truth, I think losing that last fight made him work even harder. Made him *focus*. Nobody could focus like Cassius Clay. He didn't let anything stand in his way. Not even a bottle of soda.

Me, I *loved* soda—especially ice-cold in frosty bottles on those hot Louisville summer nights. So did most kids. It tasted soooo good! But Cassius never *touched* it. Not a single sip. “Sugar and acid ain't good for you, Lucky,” he said. And that was that.

Focus.

For Cassius, there was no smoking either (“Ain't gonna put that stuff in my lungs!”). And he always went to bed at ten o'clock, even on Saturday nights. Like he wanted to grow in his sleep.

Focus.

After school, we went everywhere together, the two of us. And whenever we headed downtown, we stuck together tight. *Tight like glue*. And we kept our eyes wide open. Because going downtown meant crossing over into the white world. And in that world, four eyes were definitely better than two.

All over Louisville, we saw signs that Cassius's daddy had painted. But

the white people who owned the stores under those signs stared at us when we passed by—like they were just waiting for us to do something wrong, or say something fresh, or take something we didn't pay for.

One day, we passed a bicycle store. There was a line of bikes out front, with bright chrome fenders and front wheels all turned to one side. At the end, one bike stood out past the others. It was a brand-new Schwinn Black Phantom, with white sidewall tires, pinstripes, and sparkly paint. It was the coolest bike either of us had ever seen.

Cassius gave out a low whistle when he saw it.

“Look at that bike, Lucky!” he said. “*That’s* the kind of bike I should be riding!”

Cassius reached out and stroked the handlebars like he was petting a cat. The chrome gleamed between his fingers.

Then we heard the bike-shop door open. The owner and his wife stood in the doorway, halfway out, at the top of the cement steps. We froze.

“You boys don’t want nothin’ with that bike,” said the man, his face all red and puffy. He started to come down the steps at us, but his wife put a hand on his arm. She seemed a little softer, but still strong enough to stop him. She had reddish-blond hair and a green dress.

“Scoot, now,” she said. “You boys get on home.”

She knew exactly where home was.

Home meant the West End—mostly black Louisville. It was one of the few parts of the city where the Clays and my folks could buy a house. In most parts of town, they couldn’t get a loan to buy a house, couldn’t even walk into most hotels or diners. *Whites Only*, the signs said. When Mrs. Clay took Cassius downtown as a kid, he got confused because nobody there looked like him.

“Momma Bird,” Cassius would ask, “what did they do with all the colored people?”

One day when Cassius was little, he stood outside the five-and-dime store crying because he was thirsty. When Mrs. Clay went inside to ask for a drink of water, the store guard made her leave.

“If we serve Negroes in here, we lose our jobs,” the guard told her. So Cassius went home thirsty, mad the whole way. Cassius was so young, his momma thought he wouldn’t remember that day.

But he did.

## Granddaddy Herman's Living Room

was always like church  
to me.

I was the congregation.  
His couch, my pew.

The rhythm and blues on his radio  
was the choir, and

*Ebony* magazine  
was his bible.

His sermons were sometimes poems,  
other times stories

from history—his and America's.  
But my granddaddy's sermons always ended

the same way:  
*Know who you are, Cassius.*

*And whose you are.*  
*Know where you going*

*and where you from.*  
*Amen. Amen. Amen.*



## Where I'm From

I am from black Cadillacs,  
from plastic-covered sofas  
in tiny pink houses.  
I am from the one bathroom  
we all shared  
and the living room  
you stayed out of.

I am from Friday fried fish  
and chocolate birthday cakes,  
                    from Levy Brothers' slacks  
and shiny white shoes,  
                    from Cash and Bird,  
from storytellers  
                    and good looks,  
from don't say you can't  
                    till you try.

I'm from the Kentucky Derby  
and the land of baseball bats,  
from the two Cassius Clays before me—one  
black, one white.  
I am from slavery  
to freedom,  
from the West End  
to Smoketown,  
from the unfulfilled dreams  
of my father

to the hallelujah hopes  
of my momma.



## My Momma

smells like vanilla,  
is always smiling,  
loves cooking,  
and I bet could make  
a whole Sunday outfit  
outta needle and thread.

Odessa “Bird” Clay may be  
the smallest  
of the Clays,  
but her heart is the biggest,  
wide as the sea.  
And when she sings  
at Mount Zion Baptist,  
her voice is like water,  
soft and sweet  
as a hummingbird.



## She Says the Day I Was Born

my head  
was too big  
to come out  
on its own,  
so the doctors yanked me  
with some sharp tongs  
that left a small, square bruise  
on my cheek.

She says I hurt so much  
that I cried  
and hollered  
most of the night  
and into the next day,  
which got the other  
babies in the ward  
screaming too,  
but probably I was  
sounding a rallying cry  
to all my little soldiers  
for all the brown babies  
in the world  
to stand up  
and be counted.

## After That

I vowed to never  
let anyone put a mark  
on my pretty face

again.

# Cassius Clay vs. Odessa “Bird” Clay

MARCH 14, 1943

My first knockout punch  
came at the age of one, when  
I accidentally

hit my beautiful  
momma in the mouth and knocked  
her front tooth clean out.

## When Bird Gets Mad

at me about something  
I done wrong,  
she calls me *CASSIUS MARCELLUS CLAY JR.*,  
but mostly I'm just *Gee-Gee*  
'cause she says  
before I could even crawl  
I was running my mouth,  
and the first sound I made  
was the letter *G*, twice,  
but probably I was just dreaming  
aloud, foreshadowing  
my fate,  
trying to voice  
my future  
as a **G**olden **G**loves  
champion.

## My Brother, Rudy

came two years after  
me, and ever since, we've been  
like two golden stars

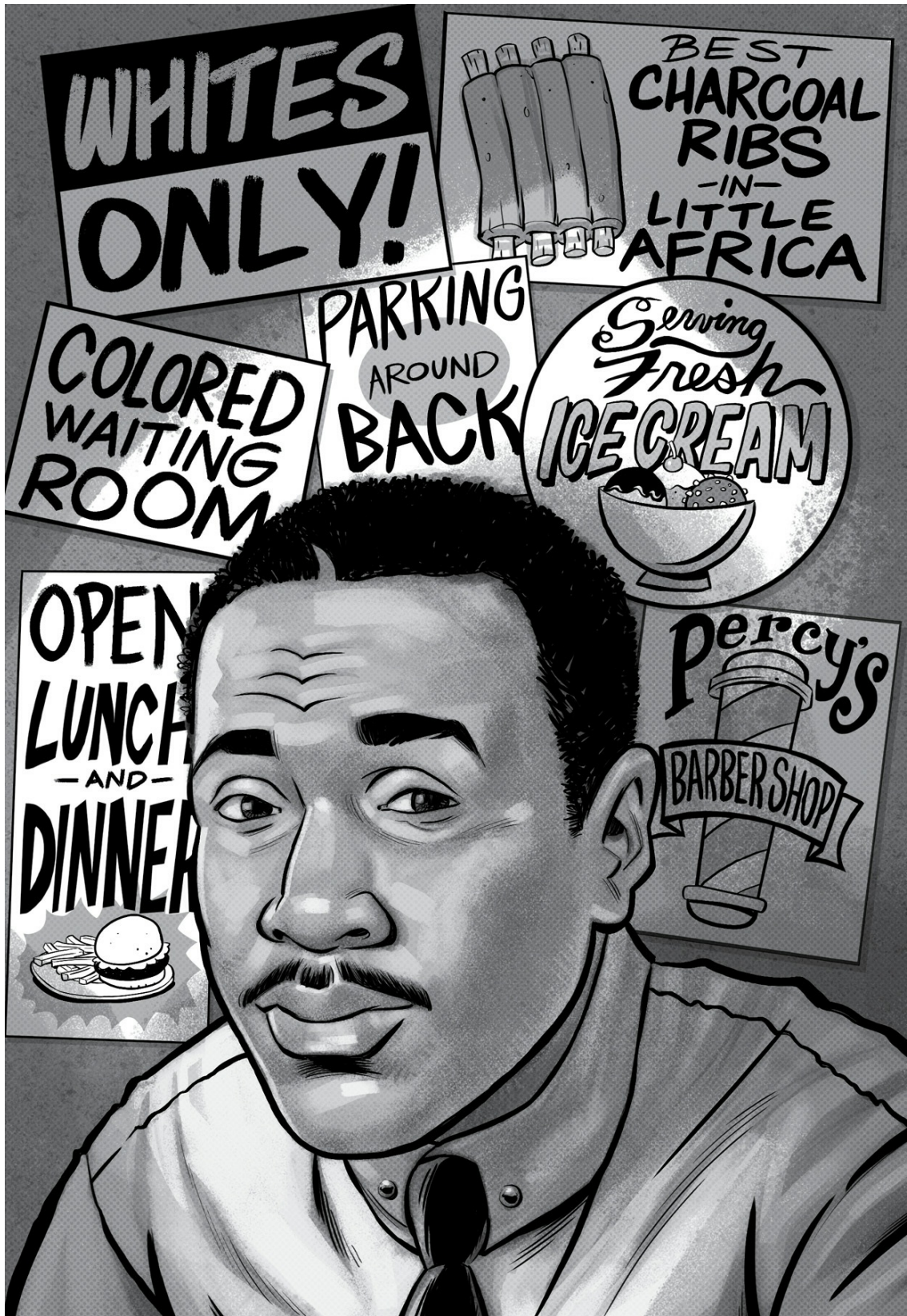
in the northern skies—  
inseparable—and our  
parents' brightest hope.

## Now, My Daddy

Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr.,  
better known  
around Louisville  
as *Cash*,  
is the opposite  
of Bird.

He's six feet  
of bronze  
and brawn, and  
when he isn't singing  
or scolding  
or dancing  
or joking  
with his Saturday night buddies  
way into Sunday morning,  
he's painting masterpieces—old Bible scenes  
on church walls,  
new billboards, and signs  
on storefront windows—and happy  
the whole time.





## Signs My Father Painted

*Open Lunch and Dinner*  
*Dreamland Bar & Soul Food Café*  
*Our Own Community Delicatessen*  
*Best Charcoal Ribs in Louisville*  
*Parking Around Back*  
*Whiskey by the Drink*  
*Serving Fresh Ice Cream*  
*Colored Waiting Room*  
*This Way for Fun—Fontaine Ferry Park*  
*Whites Only*  
*Segregation Is Immoral*  
*There's No Way Like the American Way*  
*Vote for Progress*  
*We Cut Heads*  
*Percy's Barbershop*  
*Now Buy Victory Bonds*  
*Rock and Roll Sold Here*  
*Closed on Sundays*

## Some Sundays

when Papa Cash would stumble in  
after being out  
all night,  
Momma would ask him  
when he was gonna fix  
the wobbly front porch  
or the leak  
in the roof,  
and he'd ignore her  
or start fussin',  
then leave back  
out the house  
with me and Rudy  
tagging right along,  
over to Granddaddy Herman's house,  
who would give us  
something sweet,  
like Black Jack Taffy,  
show us magic tricks,  
tell us funny  
and not-so-funny stories  
about famous  
and not-so-famous Negroes,  
bounce us  
on his one good knee,  
all while smoking a cigar  
and arguing  
with my daddy

till they both fell asleep.

## Growing Up

When Rudy could walk  
we got a pet chicken,  
a dog named Rusty,  
and a new house  
with a brand-new backyard  
near the size of a basketball court,  
where we would play with Rusty,  
and chase  
the chicken  
and each other  
around.

We had a goldfish pond  
that I watched Daddy build,  
plus a vegetable garden  
with snap beans  
that I loved  
to peel,  
and onions  
that I loved to eat,  
raw.

# Everything

was easygoing  
and laid-back  
on our side  
in the West End,  
where we lived,  
so that's where  
we played  
and prayed  
and went to school  
and grew up  
but every now and then  
we'd cross a line  
and wonder  
why we couldn't stay  
and play  
on the other side  
of it.

## The Other Side

When Rudy got old enough  
for Bird to let me  
take him  
out and about,  
we ran,  
jumped, and  
played on every inch  
of Chickasaw Park,  
'cause it was in our neighborhood  
but we'd never been  
to Fontaine Ferry Park  
even though  
it had  
amusement rides  
and even though  
it was right next to our neighborhood.

We were gonna go  
to Fontaine  
and dare anybody  
to stop us.

We told Momma  
we were walking over  
to Granddaddy Herman's  
to help him  
chop some wood,  
which was true, but first

we were gonna cross the line  
and go have some fun  
at Fontaine Park.

The *Whites Only* sign  
met us at the fence  
outside the park  
and the two police officers  
with Colt 45 pistols  
made sure  
we stayed there.



## Later That Day

we chopped wood  
in silence  
and when we were done  
Granddaddy Herman preached  
a sermon  
that I'll never forget.

## Two Louisvilles

*For a Negro boy  
in the West End,  
you know you can  
play tag  
in Chickasaw Park  
but you better not be caught dead  
in Shawnee Park  
or Boone Square.*

*And, no matter how many times  
you hear the crackle  
of wooden roller-coasters,  
smell the hot buttered popcorn,  
and watch thousands  
of happy white kids  
eat cotton candy,  
you know you're not allowed  
in Fontaine.*

*Boys, there's two Louisvilles:*

*One where you go school shopping  
for clothes*

*and one where you can't  
try on the clothes  
beforehand*

*or bring 'em back  
if they don't fit.*

*One where you roller-skate  
outside your house*

*and one where you're not allowed  
inside the local rink.*

*One where you can go  
to some movie theaters*

*and one where you have to  
sit in the balcony  
and barely hear  
the movie.*

*One where you got a decent job  
with decent pay*

*and one where you get a raise  
but your house payment goes up.*

*One where you can go  
to the amusement park  
with your friends*

*and one where you stand  
outside the fence  
like a caged bird  
singing the summertime blues,  
because your skin  
is like a crow—black  
and unwelcome.*

*One for whites*

*and one for blacks.*

*Know who you are, boys.*

*And whose you are.*

*Know where you going*

*and where you from.*

*Amen. Amen. Amen.*

# I Want to Be Rich

I said to  
Rudy as we lay  
in the backyard  
under the stars  
talking to the chicken  
and each other  
about being famous  
one day like  
Chuck Berry,  
that way they'd have to  
let us in  
their amusement park.

But, since neither one of us  
could sing or dance,  
and we both loved  
to slap-box,  
we figured maybe we could  
be rich like  
Joe Louis instead,  
buy the darn park,  
and build  
the first American Cadillac roller coaster,  
candy-apple red,  
so that any kid  
could get into Clay Park  
and ride the rides.



## Momma Hollered

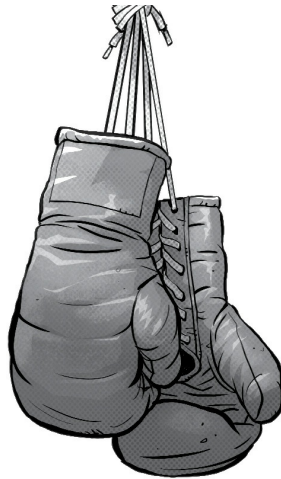
from the kitchen,  
interrupting  
our moonlit dreams and  
big ideas.

*Gee-Gee, time for you  
and Rudy  
to wash up,  
say your prayers,  
and go to bed.*

I liked pranks,  
so I stood up,  
told Rudy,  
DON'T MOVE!  
There's a great  
big ol' copperhead snake  
in the grass  
next to your head,  
and he jumped up,  
screaming  
all the way into next week,  
forgetting all about  
Fontaine Ferry Park.

But I never did.

## ROUND THREE



Did I mention I always wanted to be a writer? Maybe you guessed, since you're reading this. Written by Lucky. Or I guess I should say, by Lucius Wakely. Sounds more writerly. But luck definitely played a part in me becoming a writer.

Because I was lucky enough to know Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr.

Cassius would be the first to admit that he didn't like to write—or study. He showed me his report card once. His average grade was 72, which was just about passing. He got a 93 in metalwork, though. I guess you could say he was good with his hands.

I was different. I *liked* school. In fact, I bawled like a baby if I didn't get 100 on a test. But Cassius wouldn't let me cry about stuff like that.

“Dry it up, Lucky!” he said. “School ain't life.”

Once I got a B on an English essay, and I knew it wasn't fair. Cassius made me walk right up to the teacher after class and argue with him. I went back and forth with that teacher for a half-hour—but in the end, I got my A.

“You got it 'cause you deserved it,” said Cassius, “and 'cause you didn't back down.”

Cassius didn't like to read much either, but he really liked being read to. Sometimes we'd sit together in his front yard with his little brother, Rudy,



and I'd read from newspapers or magazines or comic books. Especially Superman comics. Cassius loved Superman. *Loved* him! He loved that Superman was stronger than everybody else. He loved that he was world-famous. He loved that he defeated villains and that people called him a hero. "Truth, justice, and the American way." That was Superman's motto. Cassius loved that part the most!

There were times, growing up in Louisville, when Cassius was my own *personal* superman. One day, the three of us—me, Rudy, and Cassius—were walking down the street when a car rolled right up next to us. It was so close, I could hear the radio and smell the cigarette smoke inside. The car was filled with young men. White men. And I guess they thought we were on a street we shouldn't be on.

The man in the front passenger seat leaned out the window. "This ain't your neighborhood," he said. "You boys are in the wrong place." Then he flashed a knife—a switchblade.

I was really scared. So was Rudy. Maybe Cassius was, too. But he didn't show it. He stepped right out in front of me and Rudy.

"You dumb enough to try something with that knife?" Cassius said. He looked right at the guy, staring him down. *Daring* him.

It was hot that day. The temperature inside that car must have been triple digits. The guys were getting mad because we weren't moving. We were just standing there. I saw the guy with the knife say something to the driver. The car engine stopped. Then all four car doors opened at once.

Cassius turned to me and Rudy. "Time to go," he said. Cassius was brave, but he wasn't stupid.

All we heard was "Hey!" as we started running. With his strong legs, Cassius could have been home sitting on his porch before Rudy and I got to the end of the block, but he slowed down so we could keep up. There was no way he was going to leave us behind.

## My Friends

Everybody's  
got a nickname  
on our block.

Rudy is sometimes *Hollywood*  
on account of Daddy  
named him  
after one of his favorite movie stars:  
Rudy Valentino.

My best friend, Ronnie, is *Riney*,  
'cause that's how his grandmother  
screams it  
from her living room window  
when the streetlights start flickering:  
*RINEYYYYYY!!!*

Lucius is *Lucky*,  
on account of  
one summer he fell  
through a plate-glass window  
and not a scratch was on him,  
then the next summer  
he crashed his bike  
into a parked car  
and flew over the car  
into a bed of hay  
in the back

of a passing  
pickup truck.

We call Corky Butler *Chalky*,  
but not to his ashy face, 'cause  
he's strong  
as a mountain lion,  
meaner-looking  
than a jackal,  
and he gives out  
black eyes—to boys  
and some men, too—like candy  
on Halloween.

We got Jake and his brother, *Newboy*,  
who both sing doo-wop  
in a group called  
the Blue Tones.

There's two *Bubbas*—one short, one tall.  
*Big Head Paul's* got a head  
big as a battleship.

Cobb, aka *Lil' Man*, is two years older  
and two feet shorter, but  
got a real job  
and new clothes,  
new shoes,  
and a bank account to prove it.

When they see me coming,  
it's always, *We should call Gee-Gee*  
*the black Superman.*

## Faster Than a Speeding Bullet

We shoot marbles,  
play touch football  
in the backyard,  
stickball out front  
in the street,  
hide-and-seek  
with the girls,  
see who can spit  
the farthest,  
pretend  
we're Jack Johnson  
knocking out  
the Great White Hope,  
and run races in Chickasaw Park,  
but my favorite game  
is when Rudy  
throws rocks  
at me  
and misses  
'cause I *duck*  
so fast  
I make him call me *Donald*,  
jump so high  
I can nearly touch the sky  
and grab a cloud.

*It's a bird, it's a plane...*



## Card Trick

*You got some speed on you, Cassius,*  
Granddaddy Herman says  
after we finish pulling weeds  
from his garden.

He shuffles the deck of cards,  
then tells me  
to pick one.  
*You remind me of myself running bases.*  
How good were you at baseball? I ask,  
pulling the king of hearts  
and sliding it back  
so he can't see it.

*Better than most,* he answers,  
throwing the cards  
all over his kitchen table.  
As good as Jackie Robinson? I ask.

*Coulda been.*  
Really?

*Coulda been as good as Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson, and all them other  
players you ought to know about too.*

Did they play in the major leagues?  
*You writing a book, or what?* he says, shaking

his head  
and telling me  
to pick the cards up.

## Conversation with Granddaddy Herman

*Shouldn't you head home with your brother?*

He's got to do homework. Momma Bird stays on him.

*What about you in school? Your lesson's important, ya know.*

I know. I get by, I say, handing him the cards back.

*That ain't enough, Cassius. "Life ain't no crystal stair."*

What's that mean?

*It means, you gotta work twice as hard to get half as far as the rest of these folks out here.*

Can I ask you a question, Granddaddy?

*I don't know, can ya?*

Why'd y'all name me and my daddy after a slave owner?

*Boy, you got some learning to do, about baseball and your name.*

...

*The o-riginal Cassius Marcellus Clay wasn't no slave owner. In fact, he freed all his slaves on the Clay plantation, including your great-granddaddy, my father. Then he went and fought for the Union in the war. You and your daddy's named after a man with principles, probably the only white man I ever knew to be good. Know who you are, Cassius, and whose you are, understand?*

Yes, sir.



*Now, I know you hungry, 'cause you always eating, so go ahead and get some of my cookies, and leave me three.*

Thank you, Granddaddy.

*Get a glass of milk, too, so you can get on home.*

I can stay a little longer, if you need help around here.

*I got stuff to do, boy.*

...

*Tell you what, while you eating up all my snacks, I'll tell you the story of Tom the Slave, and then you get on home. Deal?*

But what about my card?

*You mean the king of hearts you're sitting on? he says, smiling.*

...

## That Same Night

at bedtime  
I tell Rudy  
about how Tom the Slave  
escaped to freedom  
by hiding in a casket  
on a ship  
of dead bodies  
on its way  
to London, England,  
and how when he got there  
he became a famous  
bare-knuckle boxer  
who would've won  
the heavyweight championship  
of the world  
if a hundred Brits  
hadn't gotten so mad  
that he was beating  
their fighter  
that they rushed the ring  
in the ninth round,  
clobbered Tom,  
and broke  
six of his fingers.

*That ain't true.*

You calling Granddaddy Herman a liar, Rudy?

*I'm just saying, you think it's a real story?*

Probably, I don't know. It's a good one, at least.

*Why didn't he fight with gloves on?*

You writing a book, or what?

...

Rudy, before we go to sleep, pick a card.

## Ritual

I practiced  
card tricks  
every night  
on Rudy,  
even stayed up  
long after he fell asleep,  
trying to find  
the right card,  
trying to prove  
to myself  
that I was smart  
at something.

## One Friday

after school,  
me and Riney and Rudy  
were outrunning  
the city bus  
heading home,  
figured we'd save  
the ten-cent fare  
for some Finger Snaps  
at Goldberg's,  
when I took a detour  
and told 'em,  
Hey, let's go  
to that hamburger joint  
over on Broadway.

We sat in Rainbow,  
splitting two cheeseburgers  
and fries,  
me joking about  
Riney's bald spots  
from the terrible haircut  
his grandmomma  
gave him, and  
Rudy winking at every girl  
that walked by  
with her momma,  
when in walked Tall Bubba,  
who we hadn't seen

since the accident.

## The Accident

We were playing ball  
on Virginia Avenue,  
our block against theirs.  
It was me and Riney, Short Bubba,  
and Lucky against  
Cobb, Big Head Paul, Jake,  
and Tall Bubba.

Rudy was still sick  
with the chickenpox bad,  
even though our neighbor told us  
we could cure him  
by flying a chicken  
over his head.

Cobb's block always beat us  
'cause Big Head Paul  
was a three-sport legend  
in the West End.  
I mean, he could  
hit a rock with a pencil.  
And Tall Bubba, from Smoketown,  
had arms so long  
he could probably box  
with God.  
He caught everything.

But then Cobb pitched me a fastball

that I cracked so high  
it went way over  
Tall Bubba's outstretched arms  
and landed inches  
from the storm drain  
near the corner of 36th and Virginia,  
where it slowly rolled in  
before he could grab it.

Tall Bubba was the only one  
with arms long enough  
to reach down the drain,  
so he did, and no sooner  
than he screamed, *I GOT IT, FELLAS*,  
it blew up  
right in his face.

We used to smell gas  
all the time around there,  
but none of us ever figured  
it was anything  
that mattered.



## We Never Saw Him After That

until we sat in Rainbow,  
splitting two cheeseburgers  
and fries,  
telling jokes,  
winking at every girl  
that walked by  
with her momma.

Until today.

## Conversation with Tall Bubba

Hey, Bubba.

*Hey, Gee-Gee.*

The fellas are over there.

*Yeah, I see 'em.*

...

...

They fixed the gas leak.

*That's good.*

I heard the City's gonna pay you for what happened.

*Naw, they ain't even calling my daddy back.*

That ain't right.

...

When you coming back to school?

*I been doing school at home. Teachers come to my house. Don't wanna be seen looking like this.*

You still cool as a pool to me, Bubba.

*I look kinda ragged and old with no hair and a busted-up face.*

A little mature, maybe. You still Tall Bubba, though, still too slick for tricks.

*Thanks, Gee-Gee. Hey, what did you get on your report card?*

How'm I supposed to know that? Report cards don't come out till next week.  
*Naw, they came out today.*

They did?

*Yep! I'll see ya around.*

## Report Card Friday

I GOTTA GO, I hollered  
to the fellas.  
Gotta get home  
and get the mail before  
my daddy does.

Riney sat there laughing at us  
and finishing the rest  
of the juicy cheeseburgers  
with pickles and loads  
of ketchup  
by himself.  
See, he'd been signing  
his own report cards  
since first grade  
'cause his grandparents  
couldn't read  
so well anymore.

But my parents could.  
C'MON, RUDY, LET'S SPLIT!

## School

Big Head Paul was  
the smartest of us all.  
His hand was always  
the first  
to go up  
when a teacher asked  
a question  
about trees  
or bees  
or oceans and seas.  
Science was his thing.

Riney always brought  
peaches and pears  
from his grandmomma's backyard  
for our teachers,  
so whether he studied  
or not, he always got  
decent grades  
and even made  
the honor roll once.

Lucky was what you might call  
a natural genius.  
He knew a little bit  
about everything  
and loved to talk  
as much as I did,

but his claim to fame  
was he could spell  
mostly any word  
in the English language  
and he could read  
real fast,  
which came in handy,  
'cause I couldn't do  
either very well.

## In the Second Grade

we were sitting  
in circle time  
taking turns  
reading *Fun with Dick and Jane*  
and it was my turn  
and I swear the *F*  
in *Fun*  
turned upside down,  
started floating  
off the page,  
and then  
some of the other letters  
inside the book  
started playing  
ring-around-the-rosy  
and switching their order—*Jane* said, “*Run*” became  
*Rane* “*said*” *Jun*—and  
that didn’t sound like  
it made sense,  
so I didn’t say it,  
then the *F* came back  
but it was dancing around so much  
that I started getting dizzy  
and my stomach hurt  
and some of the kids  
started calling me dumb  
and I almost threw up  
right there in the middle

of second grade circle time,  
so now  
I just try  
to memorize  
what I hear  
and make up  
what I don't.



## Failed Plan

I ran home so fast  
I could see my big toe  
starting to bust out  
of my shoe  
like an inmate  
in a prison.

Rudy was two blocks  
behind me,  
so when he finally walked up,  
winded and holding  
his chest  
like he was gonna collapse  
in our front yard  
from running  
so fast and far,  
I was sitting on the porch  
scared straight  
'cause OUR mailbox  
was empty.



## Conversation with Momma Bird

*Gee-Gee, come in here.*

...

*I thought you were supposed to be trying harder.*

I did. I understand everything we're doing in school, mostly. It's just sometimes—

*Don't make excuses, Cassius. Your father won't like this at all. You know that!*

I know.

*They gonna fail you, you keep getting these kinds of grades.*

I'm not gonna fail. Grades don't make the man, the man makes the grade.

*Double talk not gonna make them stop thinking you dumb, Gee-Gee.*

You think I'm dumb, Momma?

*Course not. I'm just hoping you know you not.*

Momma, I came in this world smart and pretty, and I'm gonna leave it the same way.

*Well, this weekend we gonna go see Miz Alberta Jones, see if she can help you out with some of your subjects.*

Yes, ma'am.

*Now go on and finish your chores before dinner.*

Momma, I'm too old for chores. Rudy's the youngest, he should—

*Gee-Gee, am I too old to cook dinner and wash your dirty drawers?*

Uh, no, ma'am.

*Then neither are you. Now, you best stop yappin' and get your skin thickened up, 'cause your daddy'll be home soon, and he's gonna hit the roof when he sees that report card.*

...

## Turning Point

Daddy came in the house  
not like he usually did—flirting  
with Bird  
and talking all loud—no, this time  
the storm door shut,  
and he came  
in the house, slow  
like a preacher  
walking to the pulpit  
to deliver a funeral eulogy.  
I heard him drop his art tools  
at the door,  
then heard Momma's footsteps  
as she made her way to him.

Rudy and I sat at the dinner table.  
Me, not sure how long his hollering  
was gonna be  
when he saw my grades,  
Rudy sneaking a bite  
of the cornbread  
from his plate.

When we finally saw his head  
peek around the corner,  
like he was looking in a coffin  
afraid to see what was there,  
he motioned for us to get up,

so we did.

*Boys, a giant tree has fallen,* is all he said,  
hugging us like  
he'd never done before.

## I Was Twelve

when I was so fast  
I could dodge rocks  
and snatch a fly  
outta midair

when Rudy caught  
chickenpox, and  
Tall Bubba lost  
his face  
chasing a tennis ball

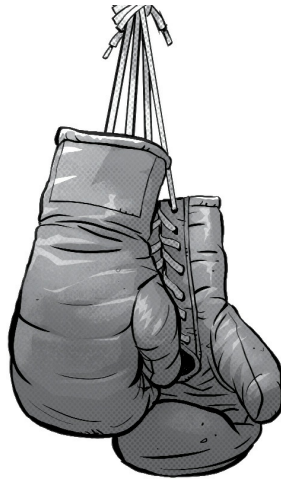
when I almost failed  
outta Madison Junior High  
and decided I was gonna  
make a lot of money  
so my children wouldn't have  
to watch the world  
from behind a fence

when I learned how to  
shuffle a deck of cards  
with one hand  
and make the king  
of hearts  
appear  
in the other.

I was twelve  
when my daddy came home  
and told us  
that Granddaddy Herman was,  
God rest his soul,  
dead.



## ROUND FOUR



We were all just kids, doing the dumb stuff kids do. But Cassius was always different, with those big eyes on some picture show that the rest of us couldn't quite see. We all dreamed about the future. But I think Cassius really, truly *saw* it. Like a movie. Starring *him*. And he always did things his way.

I remember mornings when the bus would stop to pick us up for school. Everybody got on except Cassius. He'd hang back and let the bus get a little head start, and then he'd race it all the way to school—twenty blocks down Chestnut Street—with the rest of the kids hanging out the windows and cheering him on. Especially the girls. “Crazy Cassius,” they said. “He’s as nutty as he can be.” Those same girls were the ones who winked and waved at him when they saw him shadowboxing after school, throwing punches at himself against a brick wall. Whatever he did, he seemed to attract attention. Like a star.

But there were times when he was silent and thoughtful, too. Some nights, me and Cassius and Rudy would just lie on the grass out in back of their house, looking up at the sky. Cassius would say he was waiting for an angel to appear. Rudy always had his momma’s Kodak Brownie camera handy. He didn’t want to miss a chance at getting the world’s very first angel snapshot. I

was never sure what Cassius wanted from that angel. Maybe he wanted the angel to tell him that he really was the greatest, or give him some kind of heavenly blessing. Maybe he was looking for a sign that there was a higher power watching over him. Anyway, it never happened. We never saw a single angel on Grand Avenue. But before too long, Cassius found some inspiration right down the road.

At the racetrack.

Back then, we all lived pretty close to Churchill Downs, where they hold the Kentucky Derby every year. It was one of the classiest and fanciest places in all of Louisville. Still is. It's where the best and fastest horses in the world train. Cassius *loved* the horses—the way they looked, the way they moved, the proud and noble way they held their heads. But he wasn't content to just watch them. He wanted to *race* them. So he would go out to the track in the morning, while the dew was still on the grass. When the trainers brought out the horses for their exercise, Cassius would run right alongside them. "They're the only thing faster than me!" he'd say. One time he actually got in front of a horse on the track. When the horse swerved to get out of his way, the rider fell off and landed hard on the dirt. *Bam!* That was the end of Cassius's horseracing career. After that little incident, he got kicked off the track for good. But he still hung around the stables. He couldn't get enough of those thoroughbreds. Most of all, he loved the shape of their smooth, powerful muscles, and he wanted to get his own body in condition like that—stronger and faster than anybody in the world.

## During the Summers

we went to  
Camp Sky High,  
played paddleball  
with wooden rackets,  
and pulled pranks  
on unsuspecting counselors.

We shot hoops  
with a tennis ball,  
and tried  
not to get pushed  
in the pond.

When we got home,  
we played roller-skate hockey  
on 34th Street, but  
that got boring,  
so Rudy and I made scooters  
out of our skates.

On Friday nights,  
we had fish fries, and  
on Saturdays, everybody on the block  
went to Riney's,  
sat on his lawn,  
and watched  
boxing fights  
on an old TV

that his grandmomma  
set outside  
on her front stoop.



## Tomorrow's Champion

At seven o'clock  
each Saturday night,  
fathers, sons, and  
a few daughters sat  
in awe  
for three televised fights,  
spellbound by the rhythm,  
by the hustle,  
by the might  
of two stroppey boys  
throwing wild blows  
till one went down  
or the bell rang  
at the end  
of the third round  
and the judges decided  
who was *Tomorrow's Champion*.

## Fifty Cents

Bird didn't like me  
and Rudy betting  
on account of God  
not liking ugly,  
*And all gambling is ugly, Gee-Gee,* but  
I liked taking  
Riney's money, so  
when it was time  
for the Saturday Night Main Event,  
I bet him that  
swift-footed Gorgeous George  
was gonna knock out Billy Goode,  
which he did,  
then I collected  
my winnings,  
gave Rudy a quarter,  
and spent the rest of the night  
dreaming  
of being in the ring one day,  
and trying not  
to make eyes  
at this short cutie  
named Tina Clark,  
aka Teenie,  
who all my friends said  
was in love  
with me.

## On the Way Home I Would

skip  
and duck  
like I saw the boxers  
do on TV

tell Rudy to hold  
his hands up  
so I could punch them  
like I saw the boxers  
do on TV

make up songs  
that rhymed  
in my head  
and dance  
between the cracks  
on the sidewalk  
like I was in a ring,  
like I was Gorgeous George,  
like I was a bigtime boxer

on TV.



## Odd Jobs

Everybody had a job.

We all wanted bikes,  
shiny, new ones.  
So we saved our money  
from birthdays  
and Christmas  
and odd jobs.

Most of the fellas  
would skate around  
white Parkland  
delivering roses, tulips,  
and other colorful flowers  
for Miz Kinslow's florist shop.

Riney used to cut grass,  
fifty cents for the front,  
seventy-five for the back,  
'cause the back was always larger.

Me and Rudy delivered  
*Ebony* magazine  
every month,  
but my regular pay came  
from babysitting  
the Montgomery kids,

which was  
the easiest,  
'cause all we did was listen  
to boxing matches  
on their big tube radio.

Cobb got his bike first,  
two in fact—one for his cousin—'cause  
he was shining  
one of his customers'  
wing-tipped mahogany shoes  
at the horse track  
down at the Fairgrounds  
for forty cents, and  
the guy refused  
to pay him, tossed him  
a race ticket instead,  
for a long-shot horse named  
*Getouttamyway*,  
that ended up winning,  
paying Cobb  
a whopping  
five hundred  
and sixty spanking dollars.

Riney never got a bike,  
'cause his lawnmower skills  
were as bad as his  
grandmomma's haircutting skills.

I made enough money for a bike,  
but as it turned out,  
I never had to spend it  
on one.

And here's why...

# The Block

Riney and Lucky  
were shooting marbles  
on the curb.

Jake and Newboy were singing  
“Under the Boardwalk”  
on the front porch.

Rudy was across the street  
talking to a girl  
from the sidewalk

'cause her daddy didn't let  
no boys in their yard.  
I was shadowboxing

next to the redbud tree  
in our yard  
and Short Bubba

was telling everybody  
that Cobb said  
that Big Head Paul told him

that he saw Chalky  
pulling a boxcar.  
With. His. Teeth.

# The Legend of Corky Butler

Chalky was  
the biggest,  
strongest,  
meanest  
kid  
in Louisville.

He lived  
on the other side  
of the railroad tracks,  
in Smoketown,  
he had fists  
the size of grapefruits,  
and he used them  
to pummel  
anybody who stepped  
into the ring with him,  
and to terrorize  
everybody  
in the neighborhood.

He didn't ride a motorcycle  
but always had on a biker's jacket.  
He was sixteen  
or twenty-six,  
nobody really knew,  
but he looked like a man  
and was built

like a truck,  
which he would lift to  
impress the girls.

When he wasn't bullying  
or knocking out dudes  
in the ring  
or on the street,  
we used to see him  
hanging out  
at Dreamland,  
where all the gangsters hung.

So, if Short Bubba said  
Cobb said  
Big Head Paul said  
Chalky pulled a car  
with his teeth,  
he probably did.

## The Story Continues

So, while Short Bubba's telling us  
the story,  
Teenie and some of her friends  
walked by,  
stopping in front of  
the Montgomery house  
next door,  
posing and posturing  
in matching yellow skirts,  
dancing and singing,  
stealing glimpses at me,  
and pretending  
like they weren't impressed  
with me stabbing the air  
like my fists were knives.

All the fellas followed  
behind them like puppy dogs,  
but not me, I stayed back  
throwing jabs  
at the wind  
till my father drives up  
in his rusty black pickup,  
and rolls down  
the window.

## Conversation with My Daddy

*Hop in here, Gee-Gee, he says.*

Yes, sir. Hey, Rudy, I scream, c'mon!

*Just me and you, Cassius. Rudy can stay here.*

Where we going? I ask, climbing in the front seat.

*We going where we going, that's where we going.*

...

...

Daddy, can I ask you something?

*Boy, I don't know, can ya?*

It's just—

*Speak ya mind, boy.*

For Christmas, can I, uh, get a pair of boxing gloves?

...

Daddy?

*You want to be successful, Cassius?*

Yessir.

*Education is the bicycle that'll get you there, Cassius. You keep pedaling, sometimes uphill, sometimes down.*



Huh?

*I wanna see you doing better in your schooling, not throwing punches at the wind.*

Just having fun, Daddy.

*'Cause for every one you see in that ring, a hundred been knocked out. Of life.*

...

*You gotta work on them grades.*

I know.

*Your great-granddaddy was a slave. Your granddaddy was in jail. I ain't finished high school. You got the chance to be the first Clay to really do something.*

Not if you include the white Cassius Clay that I was named after. He was a lawyer and a soldier. Granddaddy Herman told me he was a hero who freed all his slaves.

*He didn't free all of 'em. What does that tell ya?*

Maybe he wasn't a hero.

*Gee-Gee, I want you to be the first of US to go to college. Do something with yourself.*

School's not for me, Daddy. I'm gonna be a star, just don't know how I'm gonna shine yet.

*Education is the only way I know how to find your shine, son.*

You found yours.

*I would always draw since before I could walk. When I got to paint in grade school, everything changed. A teacher showed me the great Sistine Chapel in a book and I decided that was the kind of art for me.*

So, you were always gonna be an artist?

*Until I run up on Jim Crow, who said Negroes can't be artists. So I did the next best thing and did signs for pawnbrokers and preachers.*

...

*All the Clays got natural talents. Your granddaddy, rest in peace, coulda played big leagues, but they didn't allow no black players.*

I know.

*This world is white, Cassius, he says, pulling up to a church. This world is snow white.*

What we doing here? We going to Bible study or something?

*Just come on. Something I wanna show you.*

...

## Angels

We walk into  
Clifton Street Baptist Church  
and sit  
in the third row  
of the pews  
like Sunday service  
is about to start,  
only it's Tuesday  
and church is empty  
'cept for me, him,  
and a whole bunch  
of flying ladies  
wrapped in white sheets  
with green wings  
holding flowers  
painted on  
the ceiling.

*Whatchu think of my latest masterpiece, Gee-Gee?  
This is your Sistine Chapel, Daddy?*

*Well, I ain't no Michelangelo, but it's decent work.  
It's the same as the picture from the Bible, right?*

*Similar. I added my own style to it.  
It's real good, Daddy, but I got one question.*

*Say it, then.*

Where were all the black angels when they took the picture?

## When We Pull Up

in front of our pink house  
all the neighborhood kids  
are still outside  
joking and  
jump roping and  
playing tug o' war  
with the setting sun.

I climb  
out of the blue-black truck  
ready to finish sparring  
till nightfall  
when Daddy slams  
his door and hollers,  
*Get that tree  
and my painting stuff  
out the back, Gee-Gee.*

## Early Christmas

Lying under  
the tarp  
that covers

our Christmas tree:

his vinyl primer  
his lettering brushes  
his lettering enamel  
his cups and pencils  
his erasers and rulers  
his stencils  
his crusty buckets  
his brush cleaner  
his chalk powder  
his ocean-blue glass paint  
his burnt-umber acrylic paint  
his mineral oil  
his wobbly old ladder

and MY

BRAND-NEW

FIRE ENGINE-RED

SUPER-JUMBO JET

SPEED-RACING

SCHWINN BICYCLE.

## All Hail the King

Everybody stood  
at attention,  
eyes glued  
on me  
and my super bike  
like I was Commander Cassius,  
the Leader of Louisville.

I let Rudy ride first  
but all he did was fall  
and scrape my brand-new chrome,  
so I promise to teach him  
later.

I let Riney  
take it for a quick spin,  
then I hopped on, rode around  
the block  
four times,  
and had Cobb time me,  
since he was the only one of us  
with a watch.

On my last trip,  
Teenie strolled over,  
her lips shooting me  
a smile big as the sky,  
her teeth white as clouds,

then she took her keys  
off her purple rabbit-foot key chain,  
hooked it  
to the spotlight clamp  
on my handlebars,  
and said, *For good luck, Gee-Gee,*  
*so you don't fall,*  
so I let her ride  
on the handlebars  
up and down  
the block twice,  
then I rode  
the night wind  
by myself,  
popping wheelies  
and showing off  
my smooth-as-butter  
fire-engine royal-red  
Schwinn bike  
with its shiny spotlight  
crowning the front.





## After School Started Back Up

in the fall,  
Teenie didn't come around  
as much  
and when she did  
her eyes didn't light up  
like stars  
no more,  
which was okay with me  
'cause between  
runnin' with Rudy,  
getting tutored by Miz Alberta,  
and cruising  
around town  
on my Schwinn,  
I didn't have time  
for much else.

## Mystery

One day  
I was flying home  
with Rudy  
on the handlebars  
trying  
to outride  
the dusk  
and get home  
before the streetlights  
came on  
when I swore  
I saw Corky Butler  
running from  
the alley  
behind our house.

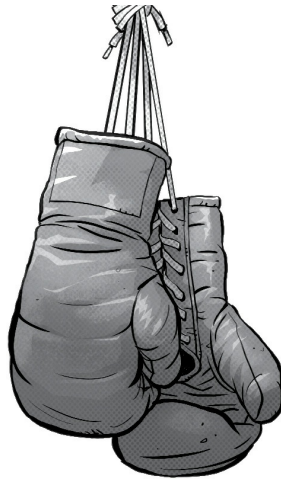
The lights  
on my bike  
worked like  
the hot water  
in our tub—sometimes.  
Today, they didn't,  
so we hustled  
in the near dark,  
hoping we could sneak in  
the back  
before Daddy stumbled  
through the front,

when *BAM!*  
we hit  
something  
and Rudy and I went flying  
onto the gravel.

We got up, bruised,  
inches from  
what was not a *something*  
but a *someone*  
lying stone-cold dead  
on the gravel.

We ran inside,  
both of us wondering  
to ourselves  
who the body belonged to,  
whether it was really dead,  
and neither of us saying  
a single word  
to each other  
or anyone else  
about it  
ever.

## ROUND FIVE



Growing up, Cassius couldn't understand why white people had it better than black people. It didn't make any sense to him. He knew they weren't any better than black folk, just different.

But whenever he asked his momma about it, she'd get real quiet and tell him to be careful. She told us that there were things you could say in the house that you couldn't say outside. And there were ways we could act around other black folk that we couldn't act around white people. Even how we walked, how we talked, and who we looked at. It sounds crazy, but it was true. We had to be one way for ourselves and another way for the rest of the world. We couldn't let white people see what we really thought or how much we really knew. It was the only way to stay safe. Mrs. Clay told us other things, too.

She told us that back in the days of slavery, plantation owners would kill the smartest slaves, because they knew they were the most dangerous. I knew I was smart. But maybe deep inside, that's why I didn't want to show it. Maybe I didn't want to look dangerous.

Cassius didn't buy any of it. Said he didn't care, that he was always gonna be Cassius Clay, no matter where he was, or who he was with.

When I got to seventh grade, my momma made me apply for a

scholarship to the Catholic school across town. It was where all the smartest kids went. When I got the letter saying that I'd won the scholarship, I cried. Sad tears, not happy. I told my mother I didn't want to go. I didn't want to be one of those kids. Too dangerous.

But when Cassius heard about it, he wouldn't let me cry. He said, "Lucky, don't you ever be afraid of being smart. Don't be afraid of *anything!*" And on the first day I came out of my house in my new Catholic school uniform, Cassius was right there on the sidewalk waiting. He walked me all the way to school to make sure nobody bothered me. Then he ran all the way back to his own school. He was probably late. But he didn't care. "That's what friends do," he said. And Cassius was always a great friend.

Looking back, I remember that *everybody* liked Cassius. Most teachers liked him because he was quiet and polite. "Never gave me any trouble," said Mrs. Lauderdale, his English teacher. And outside of class, he was really funny—always cracking jokes and breaking us up. Cassius was like a magnet. You wanted to be around him. But I don't think anybody knew him the way I did. Nobody else really knew what was behind that big smile and loud laugh. I saw the *serious* part of Cassius—the part of him that was determined to go places, be someone special, and make a mark in the world that would last forever. He was gonna make the world notice him.

Back then, in the 1950s, boys didn't talk about loving their friends—especially guy friends. But Cassius did. One night when we were sitting on his front steps watching fireflies, Cassius told me he loved me because I understood him. Today, he'd probably say, "Lucky, you really *get* me." And I did. I was proud of it. I still am.

# The Day I Was Born Again

It was a Friday,  
hotter than noon  
on the 4th of July.

The one fan we had  
was blowing  
on Momma,  
who was sitting  
in the living room  
reading the Bible,  
probably praying  
that Daddy would stop  
galivanting  
like he did  
most Friday nights  
till Saturday morning.

Sitting on the porch,  
showing my  
latest card trick  
to Lucky  
and showing off  
my new white Chuck Taylors,  
the heat  
was punching  
me in the face,  
and the sweat dripped  
like a waterfall.

I couldn't take it  
no more, so  
we hopped on our bikes,  
Rudy got on  
my handlebars,  
and we took off  
chasing  
the breeze  
and my destiny.



## We Stopped In

Aunt Coretta's bakery  
on Virginia Avenue,  
split a sweet pecan honey bun.

Rode by Percy's barbershop,  
saw Cobb  
through the window  
in the chair.

Passed the downtown YMCA  
on 10th and Chestnut,  
heard the loud projector  
coming from the backyard.

Bullethead past two gangsters scrapping,  
one with a knife, outside  
of Dreamland nightclub.

Rode by Louisville Gardens,  
home to Cardinals Basketball.

Cruised Fourth Street,  
hollering and laughing  
to the moon

like we owned the world,  
when the heavens opened up,

reminding us

that we didn't.

# The Thunderstorm

emptied so fast, it  
was like somebody unzipped  
the sky onto us.

## Shelter

So the three of us  
drop our bikes  
outside  
Columbia Auditorium,  
then dodge  
a million raindrops  
as we run up  
its fourteen stairs  
to escape  
the monsoon.

The first two things  
we see inside  
are:

Thousands of folks  
checking out the latest home  
and kitchen gadgets  
on display at the annual  
Louisville Defender Expo

and

Chalky, aka Corky Butler.

## Crazy Eyes

Corky Butler didn't  
so much walk  
as he did lumber  
in our direction,  
clearing his path  
like a grizzly bear  
on his hairy toes.

He was in  
a dingy, too-tight  
warm-up suit with  
tattered black Chuck Taylors  
covering his paws  
that he probably bullied  
some kid  
half his size for.

When he got to us,  
he stepped  
on my sneaks,  
and bumped Lucky  
with just enough force  
to make him lose  
his balance  
and knock Rudy backwards  
like a domino  
into an old couple  
checking out

a Hoover vacuum cleaner.

Then he stopped,  
his dusty-looking face  
so close to me  
I could see the gumline  
of his gigantic gray teeth,  
could smell  
the stream of sweat  
crawling down  
his dull, bald head.

Corky closed  
his mouth,  
curled up his crusty lip,  
lifted his chin  
like he was studying me,  
so I balled my fists  
in my pockets  
just in case  
this was a test.

*Nice sneakers*, he said,  
then, before walking out  
the front doors,  
he pointed  
his two stubby  
*V-sign* fingers  
at his eyes  
and mine.

*I got my eyes on you, Cassius. Corky Butler's watching you.*

## After

he left  
we roamed the Expo  
tasting samples  
and not talking  
about what happened  
even though  
we were all thinking  
the same thing—I might have to  
fight him someday—when  
I ran into  
Teenie Clark again  
while waiting  
for Rudy  
to come out  
the bathroom.

## Before That

Rudy said he felt  
like throwing up,  
so we ran  
to the toilet.

Before that  
we ate too much  
Kentucky peanut brittle.

Before that  
we said hello to Miz Alberta,  
who was teaching people  
how to vote  
on a cardboard voting machine that  
all the kids  
in our neighborhood  
helped her build  
last summer.

Before that  
I told Gorgeous George,  
You may be gorgeous  
but I'm pretty,  
which made him laugh,  
then come at me with,  
*Kid, you may be pretty  
but I'm exquisite,  
resplendent,*



*an ivory knockout.*  
*I'm so beautiful*  
*I should kiss myself,*  
and then he closed his eyes  
and poked his lips out,  
which made EVERYONE laugh.

Before that  
we waited in line  
for almost thirty minutes  
to get an autograph  
from the boxer  
and sometimes wrestler  
Gorgeous George.

Before that  
Lucky pretended  
he was blowing a saxophone  
while we listened to  
Billie Holiday sing  
“Too Marvelous for Words.”

Before that  
we marveled  
at the mahogany record player  
spinning “Lady Sings the Blues”  
at the RCA booth.

Before that  
me, Lucky, and Rudy shared two bags  
of toffee popcorn.

Before that  
I saw Teenie

eating popcorn  
and talking  
to Miz Alberta.

Before that  
we stood drenched  
in the front  
of the auditorium,  
patting ourselves dry  
with paper towels

and right before that  
Corky had just stepped  
on my sneakers  
and walked out  
the front door  
when Teenie Clark  
passed by me  
with her parents  
and her little brother.

## Conversation with Teenie

*Hey, Gee-Gee.*

Hey.

*Whatchu doing?*

Rudy ate too much brittle, I said, pointing toward the bathroom.

*Oh.*

...

*How's your jet-plane bike?*

Still good.

*I can't wait for school to be over. I'm going to camp. Gonna play tennis and swim and whatnot. What you doing this summer?*

Nothing, I don't know.

*Cassius, you don't like me.*

What you mean?

*What I mean is you never have words for me. Always "Yup" and "I don't know" and "Oh... Uh"!*

Oh... Uh.

*See, I swear you can be so aloof.*

I don't know what that means, Teenie, but it doesn't sound polite to me.

*Cassius, everybody knows I like you.*  
I like you, I mean, you're nice and all.

*Just nice?*  
I don't know.

*How about agile?*  
Huh?

*As in quick. You don't know, Cassius? I'm the fastest runner in our school.*  
The fastest girl, maybe.

*I could outrace you.*  
You're dreaming, Teenie Clark.

*If I'm dreaming, then bet me.*  
You don't want no parts of me, Teenie. I'll run circles around you. I'm so fast that last night I turned off the light switch in my bedroom and I got in bed before the room was dark.

*You may be funny, but won't be no laughing when I outrace you.*  
Name the date and the time, and meet me on the line. You may be fine, but I'm faster than an airline.

*How about now?*  
It's raining now.

*You scared you might melt?*  
NAW!

*Then get your buddies, and meet me outside. I'm gonna catch my stride, and you gonna lose your pride. Poor Gee-Gee.*  
It's on, Teenie Clark.

*Bet.*  
Bet.

## Shock

When we get  
to the front door  
Teenie's momma  
comes running up behind us  
and pulling her  
by the arm  
while her daddy  
shoots us a  
*You all better get*  
*'fore I get you* look,  
so we do,  
flying out the door,  
back under  
the night rain  
to get our bikes  
to go home,  
but MINE  
ISN'T THERE.

# Tragedy

This year...

The last new episode of Rudy's favorite show,  
*The Lone Ranger*, aired on the radio. And he cried.

We had to hide under desks with books over our heads because the principal  
said the Russians had a hydrogen bomb.

80 million locusts swarmed the desert in French Algeria.

An earthquake struck Southern California.  
Hurricane Hazel hit North Carolina.  
And the University of Kentucky wouldn't let  
Cobb's older brother, Arthur,  
the best running back  
in the state of Kentucky,  
play for their school  
'cause of the color  
of his skin.

There's been natural disasters and wars,  
all kinds of human failings and tragedies,  
but right now  
none of it feels  
lousier  
than my royal-red and white  
Schwinn Cruiser Deluxe

with chrome rims  
not being  
where I left it.

The sixty-dollar bike  
my daddy bought me  
isn't there.  
It's GONE  
like *The Lone Ranger*  
and somebody STOLE it.



## Lucky Said

he saw a security guard,  
so after I ran  
around in the rain,  
crying and  
hunting  
for the thief,  
we went back inside Columbia  
to report the crime  
but the guard  
was too busy eating peanut brittle  
and flirting with every lady  
that walked by  
to care about my misfortune,  
so we just asked him  
if there was a real cop  
anywhere around,  
and that's when he pointed  
downstairs.

## Downstairs

was a basement  
with a gym  
that smelled

like a boys' locker room  
with no ventilation

like a hot, musty day  
after rain

like cut grass  
in August

like the sweat  
of a dozen boys  
after hours  
doing pull-ups,  
skipping rope,  
and hammering away  
at heavy bags  
and each other.

## Columbia Boxing Gym

The plastered floor  
was coming apart,  
the fluorescent lights  
barely hung from the ceiling.

The grimy, white-brick walls  
were covered  
in Louis and Dempsey posters and  
large red signs

with gym rules,  
training checklists,  
*Tomorrow's Champion* announcements,  
and corny

but uplifting quotes  
printed on them:  
*Winners are not those  
who never fail.*

*They are those  
who never quit.*  
The place was loud.  
Old men coaching kids—some

I knew,  
some I didn't,

some white,  
most black—guys

lacing gloves  
and talking trash  
about what they were gonna do  
to each other

in the ring,  
and, thing was, it felt good,  
real good,  
to be in there.

## In the Middle

of the gym  
was the square ring  
with the ropes  
I'd only seen  
on TV,  
and two muscly teenagers  
I knew  
from school  
throwing wild punches  
at each other's heads  
and missing.

On the punching bag  
was a tall fella  
with a lighting-fast blast  
of a blow  
that looked like  
it could tear a man's head  
straight off his neck.

Egging him on,  
occasionally looking  
around the gym  
at the goings on  
was an old white guy  
with two ballpoints in his pocket,  
hair only on the sides  
of his head,

and cuffed black pants so baggy  
you could barely see his shoes.  
When he saw me,  
he walked my way.



## Conversation with an Old White Guy

*You lost, kid?*

No, sir, but my bike is.

*How'd you lose a bike?*

SOMEBODY STOLE IT, AND I AIM TO FIND OUT WHO!

*Simmer down, now.*

WHEN I FIND HIM, I'M GONNA WHUP HIM GOOD, TOO.

*Not a good idea to tell a policeman you gonna commit assault.*

You the cop?

*Twenty-five years.*

Can I file a report or something?

*You see the culprit? Any witnesses?*

No, sir. But I think I know who did it.

*Come down to the station on Monday.*

Can't you just help me out now?

*A little busy down here.*

You a boxer, too?

*Do I look like a fighter, kid?*

That don't mean nothing. Look at those clumsy fellas in the ring.



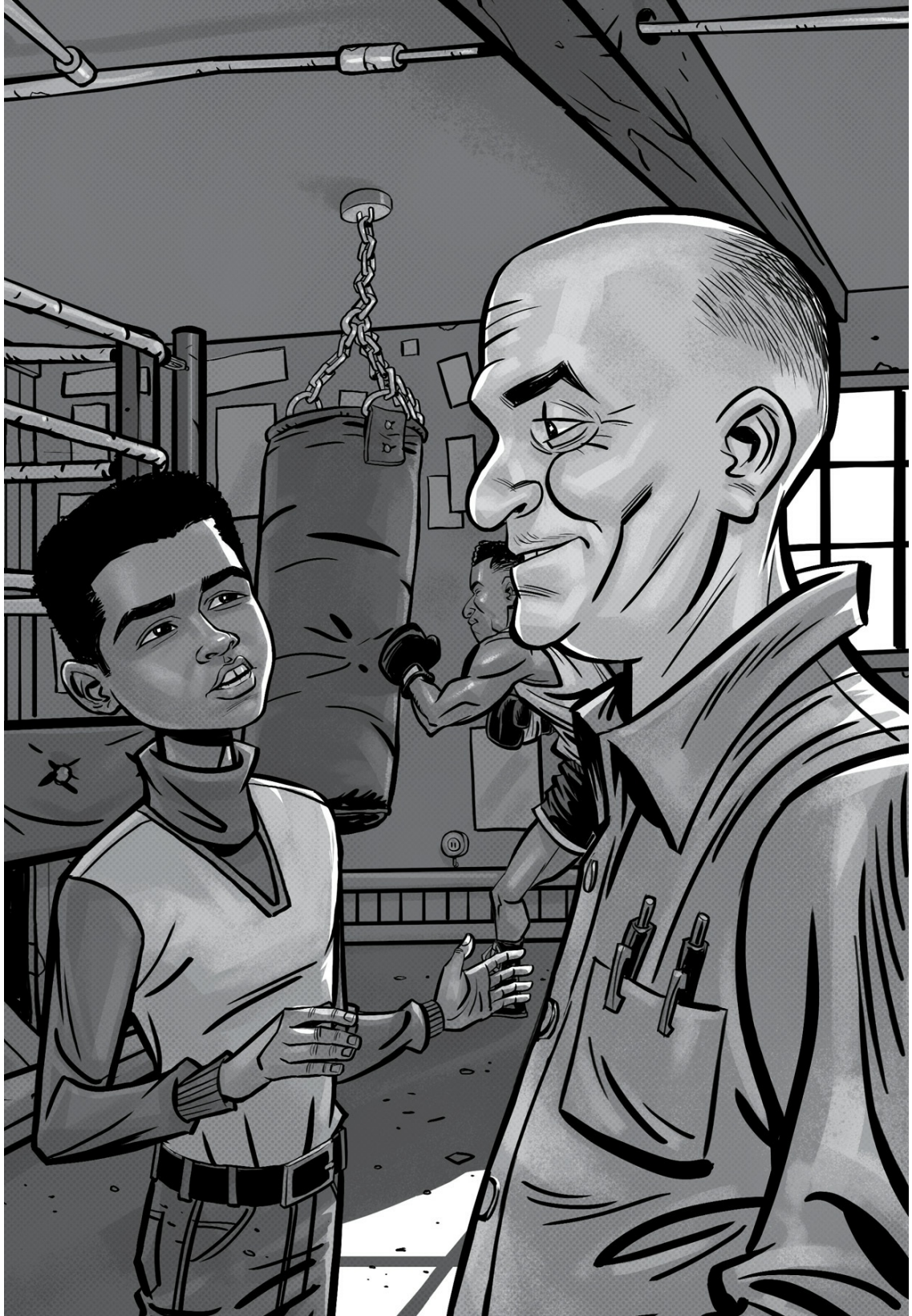
*Palookas. The both of them. They got will, but no skill, and they don't listen.  
You their coach?*

*I'm coach and uncle. Teacher and counselor. I'm breaking muscles. They're  
chasing dreams.  
Oh.*

*Most of these boys never gonna box for real, but at least they get to knock out  
their anger in the ring, instead of getting into trouble on the streets.  
Where's your badge? You undercover?*

*Enough with the questions, I got to get back to work.  
This is a cool place.*

*You know how to fight?  
Never been beat up.*



*That's not what I asked you. You a southpaw? How's your jab? Show me an uppercut.*

...

*If you wanna learn, come down here after school one day.  
My momma won't allow that.*

*Seems to me if you wanna whup somebody, you should learn how to fight first.*

...

*You know where I'll be.  
But what about my bike?*

*You can kiss that bike goodbye, kid, but we'll file that report on Monday.  
Thanks. Hey, what's your name?*

*The sign on the door says Joe Martin's Gym, and this is my gym, so you can call me Joe Martin.  
Good to meet you, Joe Martin. I'm Cassius Clay.*

## Momma, Please

let me go  
down to the gym  
to box, I begged.

I promise  
I'll do better  
in school,  
even in French class,  
plus I'll bring Rudy  
and teach him,  
and make sure  
he doesn't get hurt.

The old man  
said he would help me  
find my bike, too,  
and train me  
to protect myself.  
I've been born again, and  
maybe I can be great  
at something  
besides my looks.

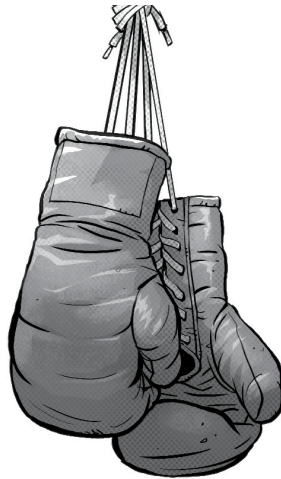
After Momma Bird finished  
laughing, she agreed,  
then told me  
Cash was gonna buy me  
a motor scooter

and that I better not  
let that get stolen too.

I hooped and hollered.  
*Merci*, I said, then hugged her  
and ran to tell Riney  
and Lucky the big news.

Cassius Clay is gonna be  
a fighter.

## ROUND SIX



As you've probably picked up by now, Cassius always thought big. Dreamed big. *Talked* big!

This one night when we were kids, we sat around his living room with Rudy and Mrs. Clay and listened to President Eisenhower on the radio. But even when a president was talking, Cassius would never shut up. He was too busy picturing *himself* in that big white mansion in Washington, D.C.

"I could be president!" he said. "I *should* be president!"

*President Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr.* He said that name would look good on money. Mrs. Clay just shook her head and tried to shush him, but Cassius would not quit.

"He's right," Mr. Clay added. "He would be the best president ever!"

"Not just the best; the most *beautiful* one!" Cassius said.

And I think he really, truly believed it.

I don't know what made him think that in a million years a black man could ever be president. In most places around where we lived, black people could hardly even *vote*! After a while, Cassius forgot about being president—but he stayed way too cocky about most other things.

Once, for about two weeks, all he talked about was the movie in his head where he beat Rocky Marciano—the undefeated heavyweight champion of

the world! And in his movie, Cassius didn't just beat Marciano. He knocked him out! Cassius was the first man in history to KO the Rock from Brockton. In his dreams.

But sometimes, when it was just me and Cassius, that confidence slipped a little. It would dim and flicker. Call it nerves. Worry. Maybe fear of failing. Fear of not living up to his own movie. I remember when his first big fight was coming up, he acted all tough and flashy around most people. He bragged to Rudy. He shadowboxed rings around his daddy. He rolled up his sleeves, showing off his skinny arms, and pumped his biceps for Mrs. Clay. But sometimes, I could tell he was acting—putting on a show. Not just for them, but for himself, too. I think maybe it was his way of convincing himself of his own greatness.

I remember Cassius showing up at school in the morning with two raw eggs and a quart of milk. I watched him break the eggs into the milk, shake it all up, and drink the whole mess down in one long gulp.

“I'm the baaaaaadest dude in Looville!” he'd shout, making sure that everybody could hear him. I guess he thought if everybody heard him, it kind of made it true.

Sometimes I saw Cassius get inspired by *real* movies. Every Saturday, we went to the Lyric, the Grand, or the Palace—the theaters down on Walnut Street. We saw every Western movie ever made. Every pirate movie. Every Tarzan movie. We wondered why the heroes in those movies were always white, even in the African jungle—but Cassius still loved seeing the good guy win in the end. Because that's how he wanted to see himself—a winner against all odds, no matter what.

The truth was, Cassius knew that most of the kids in the gym were bigger than he was. Maybe stronger. He knew there probably wouldn't be any headgear to protect him against those hard jabs and hooks. All around Joe Martin's gym, we saw old boxers with noses flattened like mashed turnips. Some of them had their ears all crushed and mangled too. Cauliflower ear, they called it.

“I don't wanna look like no vegetable, Lucky,” said Cassius. “I gotta stay pretty.”

And those boxing gloves. They were so dang heavy! Black leather, with “EVERLAST” in big letters around the wrists. When Cassius was starting out, those gloves felt like lead weights at the ends of his skinny arms,

especially after a long training session or sparring match. One night when we were walking home, Cassius told me he was worried that he wouldn't be able to keep the gloves up in front of his face in a real fight. And if he let them drop, even for a second... *POW!* Turnip. Cauliflower.

They say fear is catching—and I admit that I caught a touch of it. I caught it from Cassius. I think deep down we both had the exact same fear—that when he finally did get to fight on TV, he would lose. And that his dream—his own personal movie—would end right then and there.



## Distance

Me, Riney, and Lucky  
go waaaaay back  
like Cadillac seats,  
since grade school,  
but now Lucky goes  
to a fancy Catholic school  
for smart kids  
on the other side  
of town, so  
I only see him  
on weekends  
or after school  
when he comes by  
the gym  
to see me sparring.

## Conversation with Lucky

How you like your school?

*The food is nasty, but it's all right. They might skip me a grade.*

I wish I could skip the rest of 'em.

*I think I might go to Bellarmine College and study journalism.*

To the Olympics is where I'm going. I'm too slick for these tricks, Lucky.

*You got to get past the Golden Gloves first, Gee-Gee.*

To win the Golden Gloves is my goal  
and after that, it's Olympic Gold.

These fists of fury will be my claim to fame.

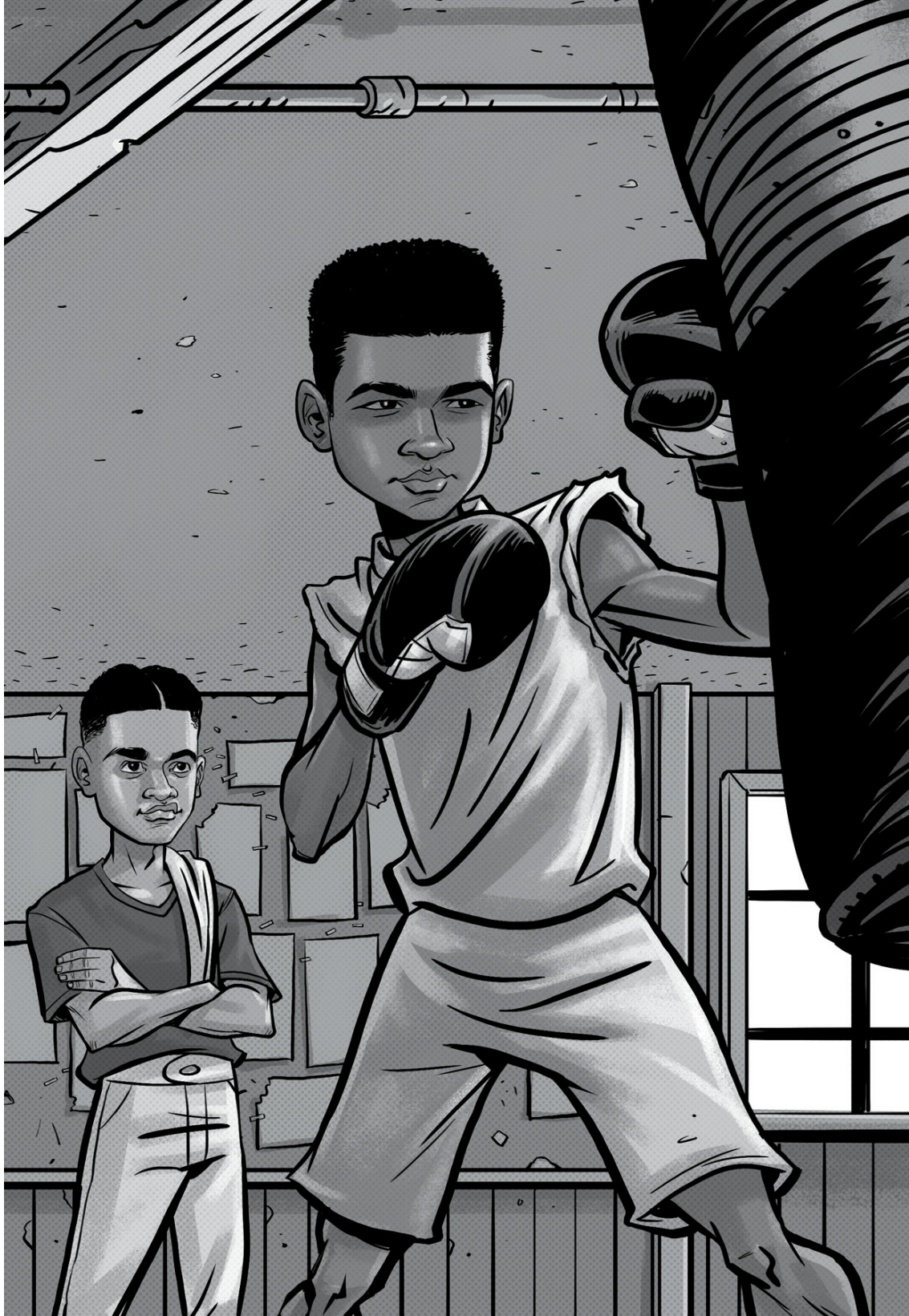
Kings and queens will know my name.

Say it loud, what's my name?

**CASSIUS CLAY! ENOUGH YAPPING.**

Oh, hey, Mr. Martin, I'm just funnin'.

*Do that on your own time. This is my time.*



*Hey, Mr. Martin. Uh, I'll catch up with ya later, Gee-Gee.*

Later, Lucky.

*Cassius, you got a dream?*

Yes, sir, Mr. Martin, I'm gonna be a winner.

*What's the best way to make a dream come true?*

## Only Way

*to make a dream  
come true  
is to wake up.  
You gotta put in  
the work, Cassius,  
Joe Martin growls  
for the hundredth  
or thousandth time  
since the first day  
I stepped foot  
in his gym.*

*Cassius, jab jab cross,  
jab jab cross,  
and move your feet,  
not your mouth  
so much.*

I don't know  
why I can't  
do both, I say, laughing  
and jabbing.

## Roadwork

Shuffle, backpedal,  
skip, dash,  
and roll.  
That's half my training,  
'cause Joe Martin says,  
*Boxers gotta run  
so they don't get spent.  
A fight is not a sprint,  
it's like a short marathon, Clay!*

So, I run  
fast and slow,  
alternating,  
simulating  
the rounds  
in a ring,  
to build up  
my endurance,  
keep my heart healthy,  
get my lungs  
and legs  
strong enough  
for the up  
and the down  
of each round  
after round  
after round.

## Chickasaw Park

Most every day  
we run before school,  
take off quietly  
out the back door  
at 4:30 a.m.—me and Rudy  
in our training gear:  
green plastic trash bags draped  
over us, and  
heavy black paratrooper boots  
that Lucky's security-guard uncle  
brought us  
from Fort Knox,  
where he works.

We cut  
straight through  
Greenwood Cemetery,  
zoom under the parkway  
through the white neighborhoods  
that we're supposed to stay out of  
to get to Chickasaw,  
where we run the park  
three times,  
circling the fishing pond,  
the cluster of oak trees,  
and the three tennis courts  
that I nicknamed  
FREE CLAY,

since they're the only clay courts  
in Louisville  
and ANYBODY can play there.

We race the last block  
back to our house  
as the sky dawns.  
Rudy yawns,  
hugs Momma—who's on  
her way  
to work—on the  
front lawn,  
then goes inside  
to shower.

Hey, Bird.  
*I done told you I'm not one of your friends.*

Sorry, Momma Bird, I say, still jogging in place.  
*I swear you so big, Gee-Gee, you done outgrown your senses.*



## Conversation with Bird

*Anybody crazy enough to be up this early ain't got much sense.  
Suffer now, and live the rest of my life as a champ.*

*How long you gonna keep doing this, Gee-Gee?  
Until I'm a beast in the east, and the best in the west.*

...

*Bir—uh, Momma, I'm gonna be heavyweight champion of the WORLD, and the first thing I'm gonna do is buy you a big house up in the Highlands just like the ones you clean for them rich folks every day.*

*Son, don't mind my job, I don't. It's decent work.  
My momma shouldn't be cleanin' toilets and cooking food for nobody. Not for four dollars a day. Not for nothing.*

*I take pride in my work, son. And God bless that four dollars. It bought them trash bags you wasting.*

*I'm not wasting them. It's part of a fighter's training, helps me sweat off the fat, keep my weight right. Plus, I take pride too... in being the Greatest.*

*Boxing doesn't make you the greatest.  
Boxing's gonna take us away from all this.*

*We got a nice house, a car, food on the table, family.  
The Bible says—  
The Bible didn't get me and Rudy into  
Fontaine Ferry Park, and it sho' ain't—*

*Boy, don't you dare blaspheme the Good Book.*  
I'm just saying, I don't need church to tell me what I already know.

*What you know and what you think you know is two different things.*  
Momma, I know who I am, and whose I am. That's what Granddaddy Herman told me.

*God rest his soul.*

...

*You gonna have me late to work. Look after your brother, make sure he's fresh. He likes to run water for thirty seconds and call himself clean.*  
Okay, Momma.

*And just promise me you gonna read your Bible, go to school, and at least try not to mess up your face doing that boxing.*  
I came in here pretty and I'm gonna leave here pretty.

*Boy, you sillier than a goose.*  
Sweeter than juice, and stronger than Zeus, too.

*Bye, boy.*  
Hold up, Momma. Been working on a poem for when I win the Olympics.  
Wanna hear it?

*Hurry up and say it then, boy, 'fore I miss my bus...*

## My Victory Speech

The Olympics gave me quite the scare.  
Fought three rounds with a big ol' bear.

Came at me all wild and frantic  
with fists of fury from 'cross the Atlantic.

Threw a big left, then launched a right.  
Exploded on me like dynamite.

But Cassius Clay did not retreat.  
I knocked him into the ringside seats.

Yeah, he was strong, but I was stronger.  
If you thought he'd win, you couldn't be wronger.

Who's the boss that shook up the world?  
Face so pretty, it's like a pearl.

I'm the greatest, you have been told.  
Now, hand me my Olympic Gold.

## Craps

After last period,  
Me, Riney, Rudy,  
and Big Head Paul  
peep some of the older guys  
shooting dice  
behind the school,  
so I pucker my lips  
like I'm 'bout to  
kiss Teenie or something,  
then I sing  
the word *New*,  
Stretching it out—*NNNEEWWWWW!*—so  
it sounds  
like a police siren,  
which makes  
them jokers scam  
so fast, they leave  
all their coins  
on the ground  
for us  
to run over  
and snatch.

## We Take

the free money,  
then they head over  
to Rainbow  
for cheeseburgers  
while I make my way  
to the gym, chomping  
on my second onion  
of the day  
'cause my father said  
eating them raw  
makes your bones stronger  
and keeps you regular.

## Regimen

Shadowboxing and jogging on Mondays.

Speed bags on Tuesdays.

Weightlifting on Wednesdays and Fridays.

Heavy bag on Thursdays.

Jumping rope and sparring on Saturdays  
every week, but

Joe Martin doesn't think I'm ready,

still won't let me box

a proper fight

on *Tomorrow's Champions*.

## Conversation with Joe Martin

When you gonna let me box on TV?

*When you're ready, kid.*

It's been almost a year. I'm ready now.

*How many sit-ups you do today?*

Four sets of fifteen.

*When you do five sets of twenty and a hundred lunges and you stop playing pranks, that's when.*

You keep moving the finish line, how'm I supposed to cross over? I'm ready.

*I say when you're ready.*

Just put me in the ring, and I'll show you. I'll win every time.

*The fight is won before you get in the ring.*

What's that supposed to mean?

*It means you gotta work harder, and faster, with your body and your mind.*

How'm I supposed to even get ready when you won't let nobody hit me, Joe Martin?

*Soon as you learn to keep your fists up and protect your head.*

Can't nobody catch me, so I don't need my fists up. My feet protect me.

*That's all fine, but some bruiser's gonna catch you upside the head one day and you won't know what hit you.*

Not while I'm moving and grooving. I got music in my soul, and rhythm in my sole. By the way, can we get some Chuck Berry or Bo Diddley on in here?

*You a dancer or a boxer?*

Maybe I'm both. Cassius Clay, fists strong as iron, feet fast as a lion.  
*Get back to your training... and keep your fists up.*

So, when you gonna let me box on TV?

...



## The First Time

Joe Martin  
let me box,  
it was  
one round  
with Caden Wilkinson,  
a short sixteen-year-old  
from the Highlands,  
who pounded me  
so hard  
he bruised my jaw,  
nearly broke my nose,  
and woulda knocked me  
out cold  
if Joe Martin hadn't pulled me  
out first.

*Set your feet, Cassius. Angle your body. Move, and—  
Yeah, I know, keep my fists up.*

*You know it, then do it. Now go get some cotton so we can clean that bloody  
nose.*

...

## Sunday

I try to sneak  
out the back door  
to hit the gym,  
but Bird catches me,  
says, *Gee Gee, I told you  
no boxing  
on the Sabbath*, then sends  
me and Rudy  
to Aunt Coretta's house  
so she can cut  
our hair  
before church.

I shadowbox  
all the way  
to Mount Zion Baptist,  
then sit  
in the back  
of Sunday school  
telling jokes  
and showing off  
my new card trick  
until the teacher  
offers five dollars to whomever  
can recite  
the most Bible verses.

## Love

It's a tie  
between Teenie  
and Riney,  
but he freezes  
on the last word  
and can't remember  
the end of  
*And now these three remain:  
faith, hope, and love.  
But the greatest of these  
is...*

Teenie remembers,  
we all clap for her,  
and after she goes up  
to get her five dollars,  
doesn't even look  
in my direction,  
but blows Riney a kiss  
that I hate to admit  
makes me feel  
some kind of way.

## Conversation with Rudy

*We're gonna be late for dinner.  
We're not gonna be late.*

*How long we supposed to jump rope?  
Till I say we finished, Rudy.*

*I know we supposed to train hard all the time, but it's Daddy's birthday.  
No birthdays or holidays for champions.*

*We not champions, though.  
Yet. Starts in your mind, Rudy. Believe it, achieve it. Heck, I'm already a  
champion. Call me king of the swing.*

*How's about we call your brother the Louisville Lip.  
Hey, Mr. Martin.*

*Hey there, Rudy.  
That's funny. My brother, the Louisville Lip.*

*Y'all don't faze me.  
What about Ronnie O'Keefe, he faze you?*

*Who's Ronnie O'Keefe?  
The tall white boy in the ring over there.*

*Which one, Mr. Martin?*

*The one with that lightning-fast jab.*

Nope, never heard of him. Doesn't look so fast to me.

*Well, you'll see for yourself, 'cause you're fighting him Saturday night.*

I am?

*He is?*

*Yup.*

Where?

*On TV.*

# Cassius Clay vs. Ronnie O'Keefe

NOVEMBER 12, 1954

We both come out  
throwing blows  
everywhichaway.

His arms long  
and bony  
as tree branches.

My feet wild like  
the wind.  
I blow by him

so fast, he can't lay  
more than a few fingers  
on me.

That's all you got? I whisper  
in his ear  
when he clinches into me

after a straight right punch  
that misses my cheek  
by an inch.

The ref separates us

and we go back at it,

mostly missing each other

until the end  
of the second round  
and most of the third,

when I land a series  
of short pops  
to his head,

one right below  
his left ear  
that makes him stumble

into the ropes  
right in front of  
where Cash and Rudy

and Lucky and my uncles  
are sitting  
and screaming,

KO! KO! KO!





but Ronnie gets saved  
by the bell,

so I have to settle  
for a split decision  
and a four-dollar prize

in my debut fight.  
*Cassius Clay: One win.*  
*Zero losses.*

## Promotional Tour

To spread the word  
about my next fight,  
Cash said he would  
drive me  
around Louisville,  
but he didn't come home  
the night before,  
and anyway  
his truck was sitting  
on two flats.

So I down a quart  
of milk,  
two raw eggs,  
then take off  
with Rudy and Riney  
to knock on doors  
and announce myself  
to the world.

We walk through  
black Parkland,  
laughing  
and cutting up  
and telling everybody  
how I'm gonna demolish  
my next opponent  
on TV.

## Introducing Me

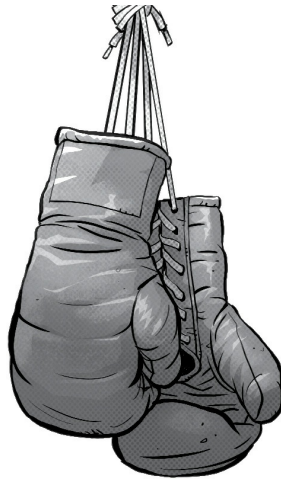
The name's Cassius Clay  
and I'm gearing to fight.  
My next foe may bark,  
but I'm sure gon' bite!

If he comes in grinning  
like he's having fun,  
I'll wipe off that smile  
and beat him in one.

If he tries to stick me  
like Elmer's glue,  
I'll turn up the heat  
and sting him in two.

Tell all your friends  
best bet on me  
'cause ain't no way  
he's lasting for three.

## ROUND SEVEN



Want another scene from the movie starring Cassius? Here's one. At least how I remember it:

It was a fall afternoon. We were out back at the Clay house. Me, Cassius, and Rudy. We had borrowed some of Mr. Clay's paints to make posters to promote Cassius's next fight. But Cassius wasn't satisfied with just names and places and dates and times. He had to add a little drama. A little color. A little *poetry*.

*Come see Clay go all the way*, he wrote on one poster. Another one said, *In just one round, his opponent goes down*. I helped with the spelling. But the language was all his. For Cassius, it wasn't enough to be a fighter. He had to be a fighter with *flair*.

Cassius loved music. "Hound Dog" and "Long Tall Sally" were on the radio all the time that year. I think maybe that's where he got the ideas for his rhymes. He always had songs in his head. But the words came out pure Cassius.

*By the end of the bout, his lights will be out!* Like that.

After the paint dried, we hauled them all over the West End, putting up the posters wherever we could find an empty space on a wall or a fence.

We were putting up the last poster near a house on Virginia Avenue when

we heard a screen door opening. A lady in a bright pink housecoat came out onto her stoop. She was looking straight at the poster—and she got red-hot mad.

“Hey! You boys can’t put that poster up there!” she hollered.

“It’s public property, ma’am,” said Cassius. Polite as always. He put another tack through the poster.

“I know it is,” the lady said, “but that’s my *nephew* you’re gonna be fighting. I can’t have you bragging over him! Ain’t *right!*”

Cassius looked at the poster. Right below his name (in smaller letters) was the name of his opponent. Jimmy Ellis.

“Ma’am?” Cassius asked, pointing at her. “You Jimmy’s aunt?”

“That’s right!” she said, pointing right back. “And I know who you are! You’re Cassius Clay! And Jimmy is going to knock you silly!”

Cassius just smiled as he put the last tack in the poster. “Sorry, ma’am,” said Cassius. “Jimmy and I are friends, but when we get into that ring, I don’t know him. Nothin’ silly about that.” And at that very moment, I knew Jimmy Ellis was going down.

In Louisville, boxing for kids was so popular that they actually put it on television—on the local station WAVE. The show was called *Tomorrow’s Champions*, and Cassius was the main attraction. In fact, he treated WAVE like his own personal TV empire. For every bout, he was so confident, it was like he’d already won before the fight even started. Cassius was just eighty-nine pounds when he licked his first opponent, Ronnie O’Keefe. And plenty more dropped after that. Big kids. Strong kids. When the bell rang, they came out swinging. Cassius just leaned back and let their punches land in midair. Then he started to jab back with his long arms.

Right! Left! Right! Left! *Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

Pretty soon his opponents would be so tired from throwing air punches that they’d be bent over and panting!

Cassius was already at another level. He had a way of knowing exactly when a punch was coming and where it was coming from. “My built-in radar,” he told me. Nobody—fans, trainers, sparring partners—had ever seen anything like it. “It can’t be!” one ref said. But it was.

Pretty soon, my friend Cassius wasn’t the only one saying he was the greatest. All over Louisville, everybody was saying the same thing.

# Cassius Clay vs. James Davis

FEBRUARY 4, 1955

I won four fights  
in a row,  
one with a TKO,  
so I took it a little easy  
getting ready  
for my big fight  
in the Louisville Golden Gloves tournament  
against a little  
funny-looking  
kid named  
James Davis.

I slept in a lot,  
skipped running  
in Chickasaw  
days at a time,  
just ran to school  
and back,  
didn't drink much garlic water,  
goofed around  
with the fellas  
at the gym,  
stayed up late  
reciting rhymes  
with Rudy,  
and ate almost  
a whole chocolate cake  
plus three bowls of ice cream

for dinner  
on my 13th birthday  
all of which is why  
Joe Martin said  
I looked sleepy,  
fought with no killer instinct,  
got beat  
*like a rented mule,*  
and lost my fifth fight  
to a short,  
funny-looking  
kid named  
James Davis.

*Cassius Clay: Four wins.  
One loss.*

# Cassius Clay vs. John Hampton

JULY 22, 1955

Hamp smiled when  
he landed a few body  
shots, so when he got

close enough to me  
I whispered, That's all you got?  
then threw a left jab

and a right hook that  
sent him tumbling  
to the mat.

*Cassius Clay: Nine wins.  
Two losses.*



## Conversation with Rudy

*You racking up the wins, Gee-Gee. How do you feel?*  
I feel with my hands. Now let me practice.

*I saw Teenie and Riney today.*  
I'm trying to concentrate, Rudy.

*I'm just saying, I think they going together.*  
...

*You know her cousin Alice?*  
Yeah.

*She asked me to be her boyfriend.*  
I thought you already had a girlfriend, Rudy.

*Just 'cause you don't have time for girls, Gee-Gee, don't mean I gotta be the same.*  
...

*You think Riney and Teenie really a thing?*  
I DON'T KNOW, RUDY!

*You mad?*  
Mad that you won't let me focus. Ain't nobody thinking about Riney, Teenie, or her cousin Alice. Now, unless you want a fat lip, you best let me finish my sit-ups.

## Before

When we got home  
from training  
at the gym  
I made Rudy jump rope  
with me  
for another fifteen minutes,  
then do bicycle crunches  
and sit-ups  
in the backyard  
until we both  
just collapsed  
under the stars, dreaming  
about the future  
until Cash brought us  
back to the present.

## We Thought

we'd done something wrong  
when he kept hollering  
for us to come inside,  
but when we did  
and saw him  
shaking his head,  
chin trembling,  
and grief pouring  
from his eyes,  
we thought again.

And, when he showed us  
the picture  
of the dead boy,  
we cried too.

# I Was Thirteen

when I lost  
my first fight,  
and my first girl  
to my best friend.

When Teenie told me  
that she chose Riney  
'cause I was married  
to my boxing gloves  
and the ring.

When I got real serious  
about the sweet science,  
trained and fought  
like a madman.

When I decided  
that one day  
I was gonna become  
the heavyweight champion  
of the world.

When my daddy  
showed us  
a gruesome magazine photograph  
of a twelve-year-old faceless boy  
who was visiting family

in Mississippi  
for the summer  
when he was shot in the head,  
drowned in the river,  
and killed  
for maybe whistling  
at a white woman.

When I got to see  
Emmett Till  
and the face  
of America.

## After

Even though I won  
the next few fights, I felt a  
devastating loss.

# I Was Thirteen

when I realized  
that maybe boxing could  
save us,  
take me away  
from all this.

## The Next Few Years

I fought like a gladiator  
ate like a champ  
lit up contenders  
in the ring like a lamp.

Sparred on the daily  
kept my fists high  
danced on my feet  
like a black butterfly.

Me and Rudy Baker  
battled two rounds  
I sent him home crying  
back to Smoketown.

Twice I laid  
Donnie Hall out flat  
walked all over him  
like a doormat.

I boxed nonstop  
and trained insane.  
One thing on my mind:  
NO PAIN, NO GAIN.



## A Guy with a Camera

films me  
dancing around  
my corner,  
waiting for the ref  
to blow his whistle.

*HEY, KID!* another guy  
in a baseball cap  
with a pen  
and pad yells  
from the folded seats.  
*YOU THINK YOU CAN TAKE JIMMY ELLIS?*

I look  
right square in the camera lens  
and yell back...

## Introduction: Reprise

I'll shake him, break him,  
then take him out.

Who'll win this fight,  
there should be no doubt.

Cassius Clay is unstoppable  
and don't you forget

THE MAN TO BEAT ME  
AIN'T BEEN BORN YET.

# Cassius Clay vs. Jimmy Ellis

AUGUST 30, 1957

He came out smiling  
and swinging,  
strong and swift  
like Duke Ellington  
on the keys,  
so I just danced  
to the rhythm  
in my head,  
bobbing and weaving,  
letting him tag me  
a few times  
so I could get a feel  
for his might  
for the fight  
he was bringing,  
and when I saw  
he was getting tired  
in the third  
and final round  
I whispered, No offense, Jimmy,  
then smiled  
for the cameras  
and opened up  
a can of Louisville blues  
that he wasn't expecting  
to hear.

I threw a solid punch

with my left  
to his side  
and while he was distracted  
with the pain  
I landed a quick, clean uppercut  
with my right  
to his jaw  
that turned that smile  
into a frown  
and shut all his music off.

*Cassius Clay: Sixteen wins.  
Two losses.*

## Rematch

I saw Jimmy Ellis  
at Fred Stoner's gym  
and we got to talking  
about the fight,  
then some guys  
started talking smack  
about how  
the judges did Jimmy wrong  
and the fight was fixed  
and whatnot,  
so yeah, I told him  
let's fight  
again.

## Cassius Clay vs. Jimmy Ellis, Part 2

OCTOBER 12, 1957

More people in Louisville watched  
our rematch than *I Love Lucy*  
that week, which is good

'cause a million folks  
saw my pretty face, but bad  
'cause they saw it when

I took off my headgear  
after losing in a split  
decision: one judge

for me, and two for him.  
*Cassius Clay: Seventeen wins.*  
*Three losses.*

## Conversation with Rudy

*Sorry, Gee-Gee.*  
For what, Rudy?

*I mean, 'cause of that last fight.*  
Can't have delight if you don't see the dark, Rudy.

*Sound like something Granddaddy Herman would've said.*  
Rudy, I'm still the greatest. In fact, I may be the double greatest.

*Can I ask you a question, Gee-Gee?*  
I don't know, can ya?

*Think we'll ever get there?*  
Get where?

*The Golden Gloves?*  
Not if you don't quit interrupting my flow.

*The kid who won this year was from Cleveland.*  
I know. He was a light middleweight. Strong, though.

*Not as strong as the kid a few years ago from St. Louis. Never saw anybody hit that hard.*  
He was a heavyweight, Rudy. Name was Sonny Liston.

*I swear he hit so hard, Gee-Gee, he could probably turn a human brain into*

*grits.*

Turn July into June.

*That's one joker you don't wanna get in the ring with.*

The fight is won before you get in the ring, Rudy.

*What's that supposed to mean?*

Means I ain't gonna always be there to protect you, so focus, Rudy.

*I'm bigger than you, won almost as many fights as you. What I need protection for?*

Keep yapping, little brother, and I'll show you.

*Gee-Gee, can I ask you something?*

You just did.

*What we gonna do after high school?*

Same thing we doing now. Knock out whoever's silly enough to get in the ring with us.

*But that's not a job.*

It was a job for Sugar Ray. And Joe Louis.

*I hear ya talking, Cassius, but maybe we ought to have a backup. Like the army.*

I got two words for you and Uncle Sam.

*What's that?*

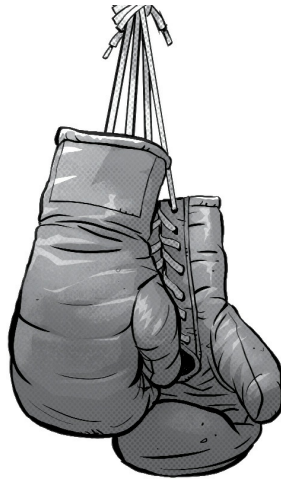
HECK and NO! Until this country treats boys like me and you as human beings, I ain't fightin' for no flag.

*True.*

Now, stop bothering me, and let me hit these bags. I gotta be ready.



## ROUND EIGHT



A boxer needs a ton of confidence—way more than normal people. How else could you step into a ring wearing nothing but shorts, shoes, and gloves, knowing the guy in the other corner would try like the devil to knock you out? Without confidence, you'd probably just turn around and run. I know *I* would!

Confidence is hard to understand. Hard to find. Hard to master.

There was one thing Cassius was *totally* confident about: He knew that boxing was the fastest way for a kid like him to become famous. So he made boxing his whole focus. Cassius was getting bigger and stronger, enough to play football or baseball or basketball. He probably could have won varsity letters in all three. But he focused on one thing and one thing only. Boxing was his way up and his way out. He just knew it.

Month after month, I sat against the wall at the Columbia Gym and did my homework while Cassius worked out. He was learning how to use his long arms and his quick feet—and I could see his confidence growing. Punch and move away. Pull back instead of duck. Stay out of the opponent's reach. Move fast. Hit hard. Stay pretty.

Even with all his skills and practice and focus, sometimes Cassius got knocked down. When it happened, he got madder at himself than at his

opponent. But he knew that getting knocked down wasn't the worst thing.

"It's *staying* down that's wrong," he told me.

Cassius knew that to be the best, he had to learn from the best, no matter what it took. When we were in high school, the boxer Willie Pastrano came to town with his trainer, Angelo Dundee. Willie was a pro from New Orleans, and he had one of the most powerful left hands anybody had ever seen. I'll never know how, but Cassius found out which hotel Willie was staying in. He dragged me and Rudy downtown and led us right through the hotel lobby. Then he picked up a hotel phone and called Willie's room. I couldn't hear the other end of the conversation, only what Cassius said. After all these years, I can still recite it from memory:

"My name's Cassius Marcellus Clay. I'm the Golden Gloves champion of Louisville, Kentucky. I'm gonna win the National Golden Gloves, then the Olympics one day, and I want to talk to you."

It must have sounded like a prank call. I figured whoever was on the other end of the phone would just hang up. Instead, Cassius listened, put down the phone, walked across the lobby, and pressed the elevator button. As the elevator doors closed, he just smiled at us and said, "Wait here."

We waited for three hours.

When Cassius came back downstairs, it was like he had been pumped full of boxing juice. All the way home, he wouldn't stop talking about what Pastrano and Dundee had told him—about how a boxer should train, what to eat, how far to run, how much to hit the bag. It was a crash course in success, and Cassius soaked it up. Every word.

"Mr. Dundee said I was *a student of boxing*," said Cassius. On that day, I saw his confidence *glowing*.

Some people say the opposite of confidence is fear. Not me. I say it's *humility*. And for most people, that's the *last* word that comes to mind when they think of Cassius Clay. He was loud. He was proud. He called himself the Greatest. Even when he wasn't. Yet. But deep down, where it mattered, he could be very humble. It was another part of him that he didn't let most people see.

I could tell that it bothered him that his mother got only four dollars a day for working dawn to dusk. Cassius made that much from just one bout on local TV. He told me that one morning, when his momma was waiting for the bus on her way to her cleaning job, he walked up and stood next to her.

“Where you think you’re going?” she asked.

“I’m going to work,” said Cassius, “with *you*.”

She tried to shoo Cassius home, but he just stood there. When the bus came, they got on together, moved to the back like always, and rode to a white neighborhood across town—a place where the only black people were the ones carrying mops, buckets, and brooms.

For that whole day, Cassius was on his hands and knees with his mother—polishing floors, cleaning toilets, wiping down furniture. When Mrs. Clay paused at the door before they left, she had to admit the house never looked better. Cassius put his big hand on her shoulder as they walked back to the bus. Not many people could make Cassius Clay feel humble. But his mother did. Every day.

# Birthday

For my birthday  
Rudy gave me  
the silver dollar  
Granddaddy Herman had given him  
for Christmas  
when we were little.

Papa Cash and Momma Bird gave me  
Elite Everlast boxing gloves  
with cushions  
soft as a cloud  
and my name  
painted on them.

And Lucky gave me  
a magazine  
that had a boxing story  
called "Fifty Grand"  
by a writer  
named Ernest Hemingway,  
who I'd heard about  
in Mrs. Lauderdale's class.

We read some of it,  
but I decided  
I didn't like it  
'cause any white fella  
who calls a black person

by *that name*  
don't deserve  
to be read.



## Beat

By the time I finally made it  
to Chicago  
for the 1958 National Golden Gloves championships,  
I'd been fighting  
for almost five years,  
showed my talents  
on *Tomorrow's Champions*  
seven times,  
and won  
more than thirty fights,  
ten by knockout.

But none of that mattered,  
since Cash  
wasn't screamin'  
my name ringside  
for the first time ever,  
because he'd gotten  
into a dustup  
before I left  
that ended  
with the cops  
on our doorsteps.

I won the first two  
and lost the finals  
*Because you didn't keep your fists up,  
and you didn't get out of the way.*

*You let him hit you too much*, Joe Martin  
told me after the fight,  
and he was probably right,  
but also because  
the few times  
I had a little rally going  
I couldn't get  
into a rhythm  
'cause it seemed like  
there was nobody  
in the whole arena  
singing my name.



# Cassius Clay vs. Kent Green

FEBRUARY 26, 1958

The newspaper article said:

*The sixteen-year-old pugilist  
from Louisville  
with quick feet  
and a loud mouth  
showed promise  
in his first two fights  
but got outboxed  
in the semifinals  
by the older, more seasoned,  
hard-punching  
Kent Green,  
who targeted  
the younger Clay  
like a lion  
stalking  
a gazelle,  
then unloaded  
enough head shots  
for the ref  
to stop the fight  
in round two  
of the National Golden Gloves semifinals.*

*Cassius Clay: Eighteen wins.  
Five losses.*

## Lucky Read

the article  
to himself  
on my front porch  
while I shadowboxed  
with Riney  
and skipped rope  
on the lawn.

Me and Riney  
hadn't really hung out much  
since he and Teenie  
got serious, but she was  
visiting relatives  
in Nashville,  
so we were yapping  
and catching up  
when my momma  
told us to go pick up  
her order  
from Leonard's grocery store.

We were walking home  
with *beaucoup* bags  
of food and stuff,  
which I didn't mind  
'cause I was working out  
the muscles  
in my arms,

but they hated  
'cause Momma Bird bought  
the whole store,  
which was twelve blocks away.

*I'd rather starve, Gee-Gee, Riney said,  
than carry all these heavy bags,*  
when someone started  
screaming  
my name  
from behind us.

## Face-Off

The three of us  
turn around  
and see  
some suspicious-looking Smoketown fellas  
approaching us  
like they got something bad  
on their minds.

Leading their gang,  
smack-dab in the front  
is a meaner  
and taller-looking Tall Bubba,  
whose face is still not back  
to normal,  
and right beside him  
is his new best friend,  
Corky Butler.

## Conversation with Corky Butler

*You been dodging me, Cassius?*

...

*Fellas, Cassius Clay been avoiding the undisputed champion of the streets, but time done caught up with him.*

*What you want, Chalk—Corky? Riney says, wishing he hadn't.*

*What I want is y'all off my block, but you here, and you know what that means. Pay the toll!*

*This not your block, Lucky answers, like he got fists to back it up.*

*If I'm on it, it's my block.*

...

*A quarter a head. It's three of you, so that's one dollar.*

*Three of us, Lucky says, is seventy-five cents.*

*Interest and tax is a quarter, fool. Pay me my four quarters.*

*We don't have four quarters, I say.*

*Then you gotta part with one of them bags.*

*I'm not giving you my mamma's groceries.*

*Then I'm gonna lay you out like you got laid out at them Golden Gloves, he says, laughing.*

...

*Hey, fellas, who got thumped real bad by big Kent Green?  
They all start chanting, CASSIUS! CASSIUS! CASSIUS!*

*Oh, I'm just messin'. Can't fight ya today, we meeting some girls at the movies. I'll catcha another time. Gimme five on that, he adds, laughing, then holding out his palm for me to slap it.*

*I can't give you five, 'cause you full of jive...*

# Sometimes My Mouth Moves Faster Than My Mind

I'd give you eight,  
but ya teeth ain't straight.

This makes some of his gang giggle,  
but it's the next thing I say

that has them all laughing  
out loud like hyenas

and brings me face-to-face  
with the wrath of Chalky.

I would give you thirty  
but your face too dirty.

Can't give you forty, 'cause—  
*You got a big lip, Clay, Corky says,*

taking a swing  
that I dodge,

just as a police car creeps by,  
eyeing us all.

*How about I make it a big FAT one!*

How about you try? I say back.

*I should knock you out  
right here, but I want*

*the whole world to see  
these fists upside your head.*

Name the day and the time, Corky.  
*Me and you in the ring.*

Then let's do that.  
*Then let's do that.*



## You're Crazy

*if you get in the ring  
with him, Riney says,  
as we pick up the bags*

*and turn to leave.  
Yeah, Gee-Gee,  
he doesn't fight fair, Lucky chimes in.*

*He's liable to have  
some rocks  
in his gloves, and*

*I knew they were both right  
and for a quick second  
I was beginning to have*

*second thoughts  
about boxing him,  
until I heard Corky Butler yell*

*from halfway down the block,  
HEY, CASSIUS, IS THIS YOURS?  
then launch toward me*

*the purple lucky rabbit-foot key chain  
that Teenie had hooked  
to the spotlight clamp*

on the handlebars  
of my stolen, brand-new  
red Schwinn bicycle.

# Cassius Clay vs. Corky Butler

JULY 26, 1958

Corky was shorter  
than me  
but I swear he looked  
like what a giant earthquake  
would look like  
if it boxed  
and planned  
on killing someone.

I bounced  
on my side of the ring,  
shuffled my feet,  
smiled for the crowd,  
recited the Lord's Prayer,  
anything to hide my shaky knees  
and the fact  
that I was scared  
to death.

Behind my corner  
was Cash bragging,  
Bird, with her eyes closed  
like she did at most  
of my fights,  
my brother  
plus all the cats  
from the neighborhood,  
and some classmates

standing ringside,  
cheering me on.

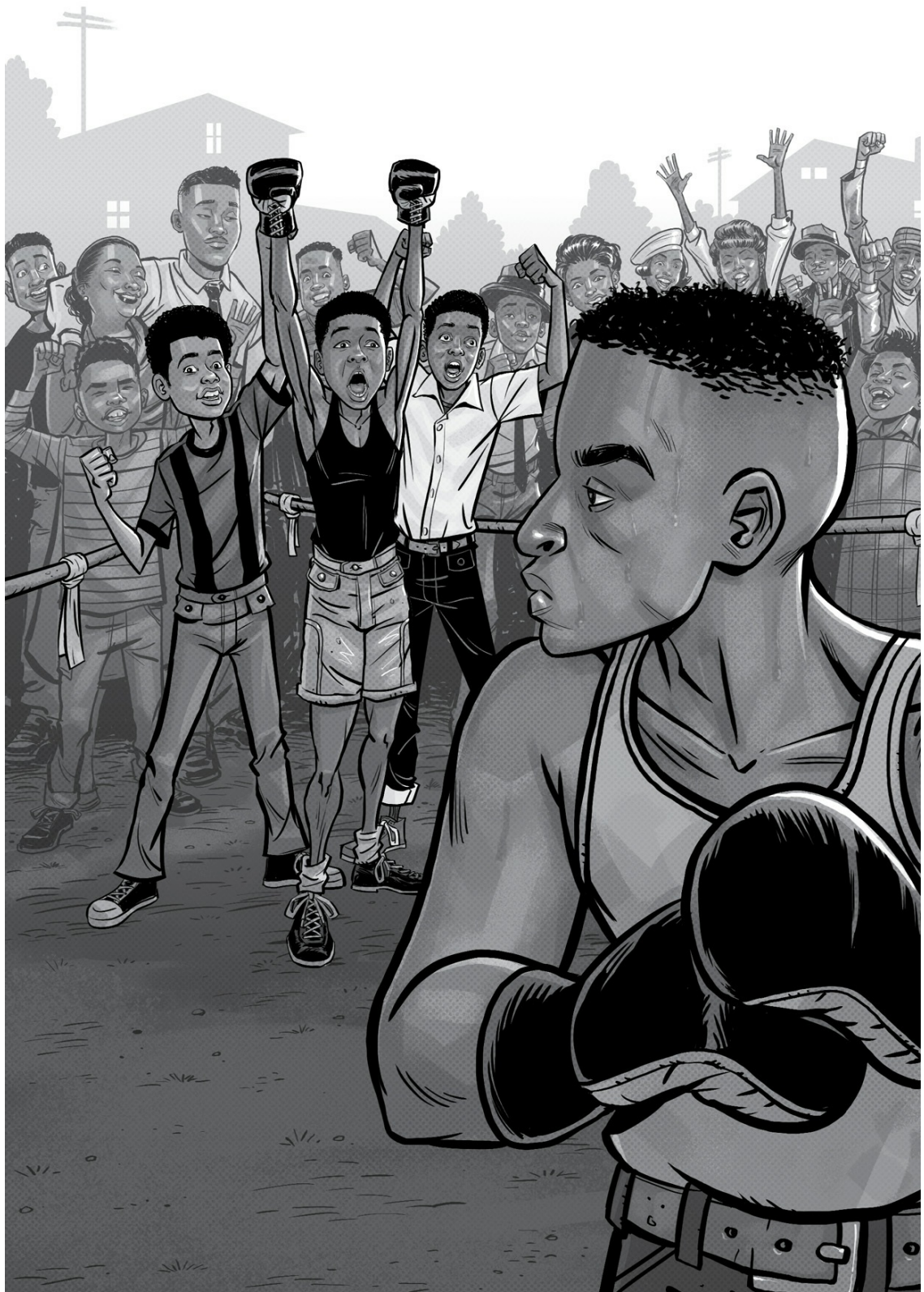
The bell rang  
and I came out throwing jabs,  
quickly moving  
out of the way  
of his mile-a-minute sledgehammer punches  
'cause if just one of them landed  
I'd have been out  
for the count.

In the second round,  
he musta swung  
fifty times, but  
couldn't connect  
'cause he couldn't catch me,  
plus he started getting tired,  
and a little slower.  
He chased me  
around the outdoor ring  
and each time  
he got close enough  
I just ducked,  
tagged him real good,  
and kept moving.

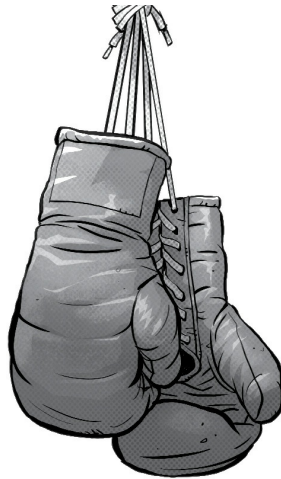
Then, outta nowhere,  
he quit.

That's right.  
Before the end  
of the second round  
of our showdown,  
Corky Butler,

the baddest bully in Louisville,  
screamed, *This ain't fair*, then  
ran out of the ring  
with a black eye  
and a bloodied ego.



## ROUND NINE



Sometimes, I think I knew Cassius better than I knew myself. I could tell that all the seeds of his greatness were already in him back in Louisville. He was bound for big things. I knew it. A lot of people did.

Unless you were around him back then, it's hard to imagine his dedication to boxing—his preparation, his focus. When he was getting ready for the National Golden Gloves competition, Rudy and I trained with him every single day. We ran with him, jumped rope with him, shadowboxed with him. Naturally, he left us in the dust. And after we were both worn out, Cassius just kept going.

But there were times when Cassius wore even *himself* out. Like the time he fell asleep in the Nazareth College library. I know what you're thinking—a library is the last place you'd expect to find Cassius. But he wasn't there to read. It was his night job. For sixty cents an hour, he dusted the shelves and waxed the tables and chairs. No doubt he learned how by watching his mother clean houses. But one night he was so exhausted from training that he just put his head down on one of the tables and drifted off. Funny, there's a sign in that library, still today, that says, *Cassius slept here*.

As the trip to Chicago got closer and closer, Cassius kept his eye on that Golden Gloves championship. Along the way, he'd gotten knocked to the mat

a few times, but you could never *keep* him down. That's a lesson I learned from Cassius—and I hold it close to this very day. My idea was always to be a writer. And believe me, I've had my share of rejections and failures. But I always got back up—just like Cassius taught me—and kept on writing.

In June, I sat with the Clay family when Cassius graduated from Central High School. Some of the teachers had said Cassius shouldn't get his diploma because he hadn't passed English. He still owed Mrs. Lauderdale a term paper. But the principal, Mr. Wilson, was in Cassius's corner. He said to the teachers, "One day our greatest claim to fame is going to be that we knew Cassius Clay, or taught him." So Mrs. Lauderdale told Cassius he could give an oral presentation instead of writing a paper. It didn't come as much of a shock that Cassius decided to talk about his adventures as an amateur boxer. He made Rudy and me sit on his front porch while he practiced that speech over and over—and got better each time. We all knew Cassius wasn't a great writer. But he was a world-class talker. And of course, he passed.

When they called his name at graduation, Cassius got a standing ovation. You couldn't hear yourself with how loud that applause was. That got Mrs. Clay crying. After the ceremony, Cassius hugged her for a solid five minutes. He was always a good son, a good brother, a good friend.

Years later, after one of his historic fights, a bigtime sports reporter asked him what he wanted to be remembered for. This is what he said:

"I'd like for them to say, he took a few cups of love, he took one tablespoon of patience, one teaspoon of generosity, one pint of kindness. He took one quart of laughter, one pinch of concern, and then he mixed willingness with happiness, he added lots of faith, and he stirred it up well. Then he spread it over a span of a lifetime, and he served it to each and every deserving person he met."

I make my living as a writer. I wish I'd written that.

So, what about that Golden Gloves championship fight in Chicago? What do you think happened? Did Cassius get knocked down one more time? I'll never forget that night. I saw it all, live, from the front row.

The way I see it, that's the night everything really began. The night it all got real.



## At Central High School

I got sent  
to Mr. Wilson's office  
a lot

for talking  
in Miz Raymond's class  
while she read *Invisible Man*

for keeping raw onions  
and garlic  
in my pockets

for trashing  
the devil's food cake  
she brought in  
for her birthday  
and asking her why  
did angel food cake  
get to be white

for drawing a portrait  
of her  
without her wig

for not doing the homework  
'cause I was too busy  
training at Columbia Gym

from four o'clock till eight  
and sparring at Fred Stoner's gym  
from eight till midnight

for daydreaming  
about what combinations  
I was gonna throw  
at the Golden Gloves:

*Jab*

*Step*  
*to the left*

*Duck*  
*Step*

*to the right*

for not wanting  
to be  
invisible.

## The Principal

*Clay, you have a unique set of gifts.  
I do believe you  
will one day be  
a boxing champion, he'd say,  
but if you're gonna make it  
out of high school,  
I'm gonna need you  
to get your mind right.*

Then he'd give me  
a history lesson,  
like Granddaddy Herman used to.

*You know, a lot of people sacrificed  
for you to be exceptional, Cassius.  
If you're gonna be the greatest,  
best to start acting like it.*

Then he'd start reading  
*Invisible Man*  
or whatever book  
we were reading,  
picking up  
where Miz Raymond left off.

And I'd listen.



## Talking Trash

*It's hotter  
than a Texas parking lot  
in this joint,  
yelled a burly fella  
who was also training  
for the '59 National Golden Gloves.*

*This hot ain't squat, Mr. Big Shot,  
I hollered back, still hitting  
the speed bags.  
These fists I got are meteors,  
super-hot,  
burn you up like kilowatts,  
knock you outta this world  
like an astronaut.*

*Cassius, you a lightweight.  
You don't want  
no parts of me, he growled  
from the ropes.  
You may have scared  
that nasty Corky fella, but  
you don't scare me.  
I'm a real monster.  
I'm King Kong,  
and I'll tear ya limbs off,  
stick 'em in that running mouth  
of yours.*

You right about King Kong, I shot back,  
'cause you one big, ugly sucker,  
and I don't want  
no parts of that ugly.

The place went ape crazy,  
laughing with me,  
at him.

He came out of the ring,  
charging like a bull,  
till one of his trainers  
cut him off,  
called him *CHAMP*,  
then told me,  
*Loose lips sink ships.*

I don't care if he is  
a heavyweight, I hollered.  
Tell that CHUMP  
Cassius Clay don't panic,  
I'll take him down  
just like the *Titanic*.

## After Winning

my second Louisville tournament trophy,  
Joe Martin told me  
I was ready  
for Chicago again,  
for the National Golden Gloves,  
said I was moving  
like a mustang,  
finally keeping  
my head  
and my fists up,  
throwing jabs  
swift and easy,  
and that I should  
take a day off,  
rest my body,  
give my mind a workout,  
before the trip,  
so he sent me  
to the YMCA  
to watch fight films  
and study the greats.  
*Cassius, immature boxers imitate,*  
*mature boxers steal,* he said, laughing.

So that's what I did.

# Jack Johnson vs. Tommy Burns

DECEMBER 26, 1908

John Arthur “Jack” Johnson,  
aka the Galveston Giant,  
was big and strappy,  
a hard-as-coal brute  
who knocked out everybody  
he fought, except  
Tommy Burns, the heavyweight champion,  
who refused to fight him,  
until Johnson chased  
and stalked him  
around the world  
for nearly two years,  
buying ringside seats  
to his fights  
just to heckle  
and hound him  
into the ring.

For fourteen rounds,  
I watched the Goliath Johnson  
toy with Burns like  
he was David  
without a slingshot.

In the first couple minutes  
of each round,  
Johnson taunted him,  
laughing at Burns’s blows,



sometimes even making jokes  
to the fans sitting  
ringside,  
and at the end  
of each round  
he'd punish Burns  
with a barrage  
of powerful punches  
that over time  
just crushed him.

I never got to see  
round 15,  
and neither did  
the 2,000 people  
standing  
inside Sydney Stadium  
in Australia,  
'cause Johnson lifted Burns  
off his feet  
with an uppercut  
that demolished him  
so handily,  
the local police  
turned off the film cameras,  
rushed into the ring,  
stopped the fight,  
all so no one ever got to see  
John Arthur "Jack" Johnson,  
aka the Galveston Giant,  
become  
the first black  
heavyweight champion  
of the world.

## The Brown Bomber

Granddaddy Herman  
and Papa Cash  
used to argue  
over everything—from  
whether it was gonna rain  
that day to  
who got to eat  
the last piece  
of fried chicken—but  
the one thing  
they never disagreed on  
was the best  
heavyweight boxer  
in history.

Joe Louis Barrow,  
aka the Brown Bomber  
from Detroit,  
wasn't flashy,  
stayed pretty quiet  
in and out  
of the ring,  
but boxed loud,  
fought with short,  
powerful counterblows  
like Jack Johnson, only  
his were faster,  
more precise combinations.

He let his fists  
do the talking,  
and boy did they HOLLER.

Louis had a right cross  
that could probably level  
Superman.  
One punch  
was all he needed  
but he always threw  
a flurry, battering each  
of his 51 opponents  
in knockouts  
as heavyweight champion  
until he met  
the BROCKTON Bomber.

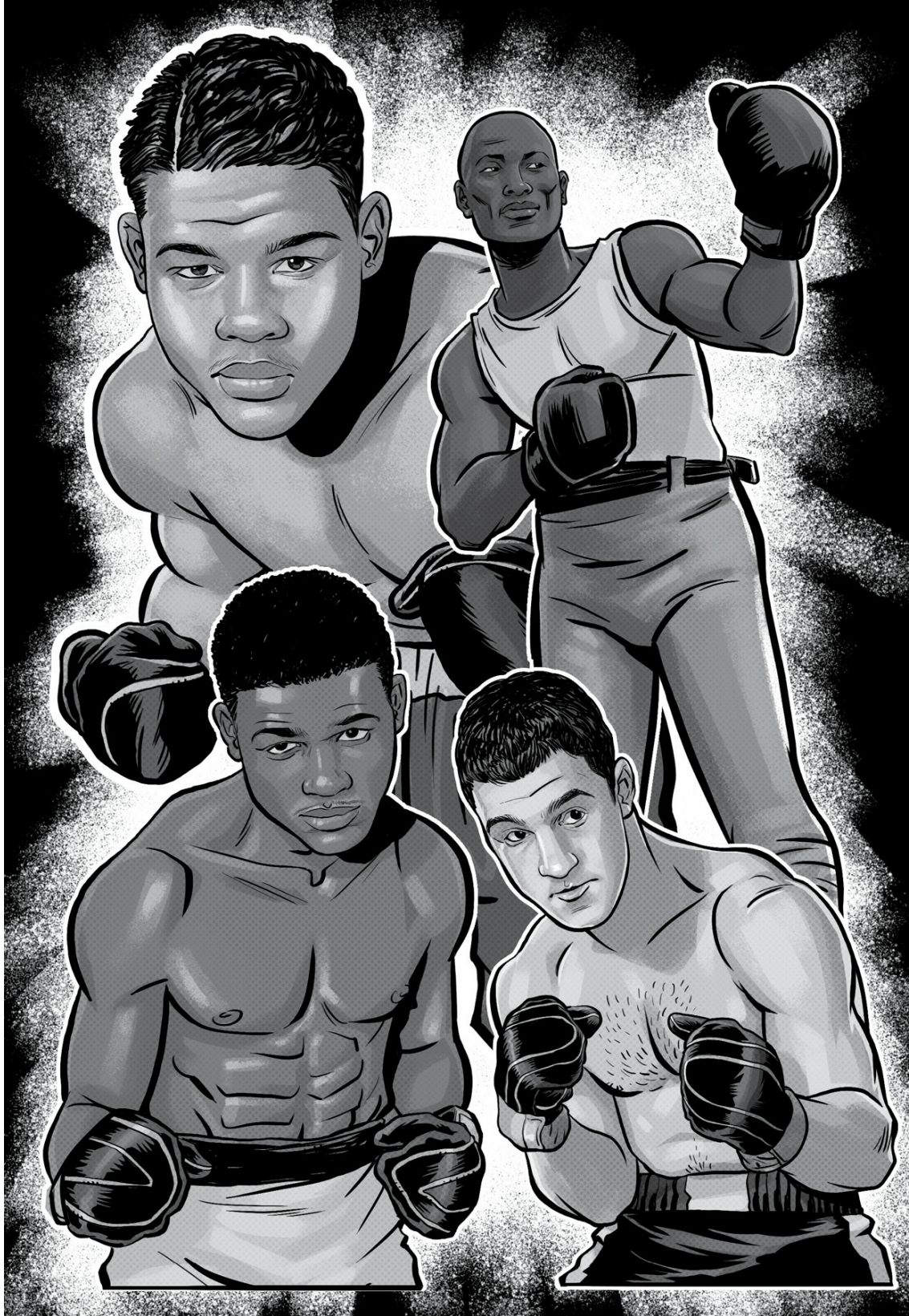
# Joe Louis vs. Rocky Marciano

OCTOBER 26, 1951

Rocky was four inches shorter,  
looked up  
to Joe Louis  
as a god,  
but when they got  
into the ring,  
it was just two mortals—one young,  
one aging—going at it.

The match was brutal.

I only watched  
it once  
'cause who really wants  
to see  
their hero  
get older,  
get slower,  
get knocked  
off their pedestal  
by the new guy.



Rocky was a swarmer,  
a slugger,  
and a brawler  
who liked to crouch  
and strike  
from down under,  
which he did  
against Louis  
for eight long rounds,  
and it wasn't pretty.

The next morning,  
a sports reporter wrote  
in the *New York Herald Tribune*:

*Rocky hit Joe  
a left hook  
and knocked him down.  
Then Rocky hit him  
another hook  
and knocked him out.  
A third and final blow  
to the neck followed  
that knocked him  
out of the ring.  
And out of  
the fight business.*

That was Joe Louis's last fight  
and probably the biggest  
of Rocky Marciano's  
record-breaking  
49–0 career  
as a professional boxer.

## Sweet as Sugar

While I wait  
for the front-desk clerk  
at the YMCA  
to load  
the Sugar Ray Robinson  
highlight film,  
Lucky reads out loud  
from a biography  
we checked out  
of the library.

*Walker Smith Jr.  
was fifteen  
when he changed  
his name,  
when he borrowed  
his older friend  
Ray Robinson's birth certificate  
so he could box  
in a tournament  
for boys eighteen  
and older.*

When the film starts,  
we watch  
in awe  
as Sugar Ray dances  
around the ring,

destroying  
fighter after fighter  
with a sweet, deadly  
knockout left hook  
that wipes the mat  
with his opponents  
one hundred and seventy-three times,  
almost half of them  
before the first round  
even ends.

I'm gonna slay like Sugar Ray, I say,  
jumping up,  
mimicking  
his fancy footwork  
and sharp jabs.



## Bon Voyage

Momma throws me  
a party fit  
for a king,  
but won't let  
me, Rudy, Lucky,  
Riney, Small Bubba,  
and Big Head Paul  
eat till all my aunts, uncles,  
and cousins show up,  
and Cash gets back  
from Aunt Coretta's  
with the desserts.

Finally, he blows the horn  
for me to come out  
and help him  
bring in the cakes,  
and when I do  
I run smack-dab  
into Teenie Clark.

## Conversation with Teenie

Hey, Teenie.  
*Hey, Gee-Gee.*

You looking for Riney?  
*I'm looking for you.*

I'm kinda in the middle of preparing for the Chicago Golden Gloves tournament.  
*I heard. That's why I came.*

...

*Just wanted to say good luck, Cassius Clay.*

Okay, thank you.  
*Why you acting so weird?*

I'm not acting weird.  
*You still have that rabbit foot I gave you?*

Yep. But, I don't need no luck. The fighter ain't been born to beat me.  
*Well, you better not lose, then.*

...

...

How's your new school?

*Every student gets a book, and each class has its own pair of scissors.*

Sounds decent.

*Yeah, it is, but the white boys are daft.*

I don't know what that means.

*It means they're stupid. And sometimes mean. Integration is not so nice.*

I thought the Supreme Court said integration was gonna solve all the problems.

*They lied. Going to school with white boys liable to cause more problems.*

True.

*You having a party?*

It's not really a party.

*You gonna invite me in, Gee-Gee?*

...

*Sure smells good in there.*

You can come in if you want. Riney's inside.

*Why, thank you, Gee-Gee. Don't mind if I do.*

## Golden Gloves Party Menu

Three trays of meatloaf  
Two bowls of cornbread dressing  
Two huge buckets of fried chicken  
A huge pot of collard greens  
A ham hock  
A macaroni casserole  
Dozens of hot buttered rolls  
Two large strawberry sheet cakes  
Boatloads of strawberry ice cream  
And a great big ol' pitcher  
of extra-sweet tea.

## Momma Bird's Prayer

*We gather together  
to send this boy out  
into the world,  
and ask that you hold  
his dreams tight,  
let them rocket  
to the stars  
and beyond.*

*Life is like a sky  
full of possibility  
and Gee-Gee is our  
great golden eagle.*

*In this room full of angels,  
remember whose you are, Cassius Clay.  
Hold fast!  
Together, we can dream a new world.  
United we stand,  
divided we fall—*

*GOD BLESS US, Cash interrupts. NOW, LET'S EAT, Y'ALL!*

## After Dinner

Cash is drinking, laughing, and hugging on Bird.  
Lucky's reading *Lord of the Flies*, not saying a word.

Riney and Teenie on the couch eating cake,  
and Rudy ate so much he's got a bellyache.

All my cousins congratulate me.  
Aunts and uncles celebrate me.

Bird says, *Show 'em your appreciation*,  
so I put on a magical demonstration.

## Pick a Card

and remember it,  
then place it  
back in the deck, I say to Riney,  
winking at Teenie,  
while shuffling  
the cards  
and recounting the story  
about that time  
Cobb and Jake were walking to school  
in the blizzard  
and they slid  
down the hill  
on Virginia Avenue,  
got trapped  
beneath the snow,  
and how I was running by  
and heard them screaming,  
then dug 'em out  
with my big paratrooper boot.

When I finish,  
I spread the whole deck  
face-up  
on the table,  
but one card is face-down.  
Turn it over, I say,  
and he does.

## How'd You Do That?

Riney asks,  
on my front porch  
waiting for Teenie  
to say goodbye  
to everybody  
in my family.

*It's just science, y'all, Big Head Paul says.  
Ya know Gee-Gee got a memory like a hawk,  
Rudy chimes in.*

All y'all wrong.  
It's misdirection.  
I get you to commit  
to believing  
in me  
before I even show you  
the card trick.  
Your expectations  
and my reality  
all mixed up together.  
I knew your card  
before you knew it.

*That ain't even possible, Gee-Gee. Plus, you shuffled  
them all out of order, Lucky says.*



Or, I shuffled them IN order  
and created chaos  
in your mind.

*Huh?* Rudy asks, scratching his head.  
*What did the story about digging Cobb out of the snow have to do with it,  
though?* Riney asks.

I told you, it's misdirection. I get you thinking what I want you to think, then  
I can get you to do what I want you to do.  
*Y'all talking about boxing again?* Teenie asks, coming out the front door.

Yep, I think. That's exactly what I'm talking about.  
*I sure hope you knock some cans off at the Golden Gloves, Gee-Gee,* Lucky  
says, giving me five before he leaves.

*Yeah, win it for the West End, for Louisville,* Big Head Paul says, waving  
goodbye.  
*Good luck at the tournament, Gee-Gee,* Riney says, shaking his head as he  
and Teenie leave hand in hand.

*He doesn't need luck, right, Cassius?* Teenie hollers back.  
Sure don't, I yell. Fight is won way before you get in the ring.

## The Night Before

I leave  
for the finals  
of the 1959 Golden Gloves  
Tournament of Champions  
in Chicago  
I sprint through Chickasaw Park,  
then down by  
the Ohio River,  
shadowbox  
the frigid nighttime air,  
get my head right,  
think about  
my future.

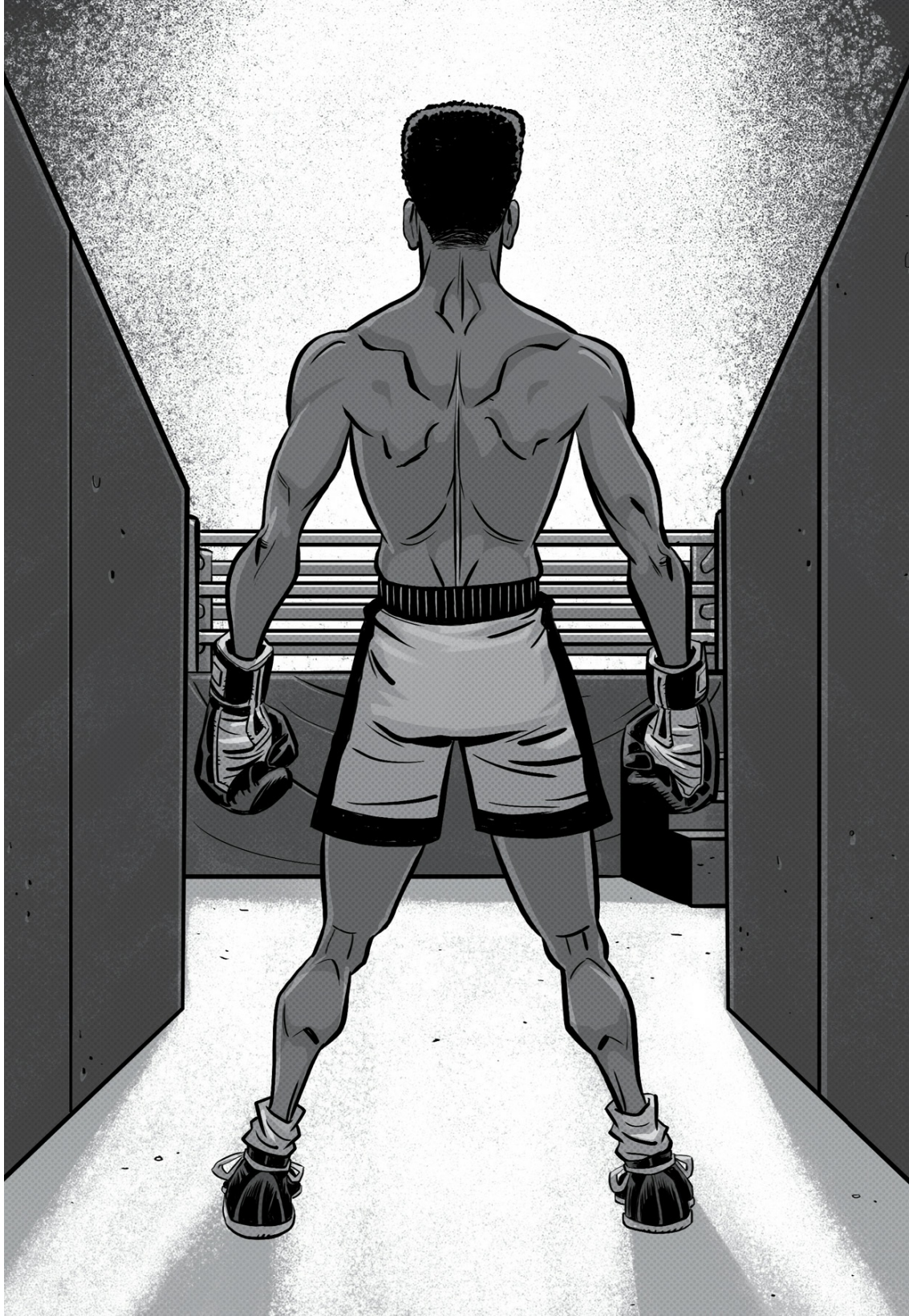
On the way back  
I jog through  
Bellarmino College  
in the Highlands,  
where Lucky says  
he's gonna go,  
pass by  
Columbia Auditorium & Gym,  
then decide to  
run through Greenwood Cemetery  
and visit with  
my past.

## Amen. Amen. Amen.

Granddaddy Herman  
Because of you  
I know who I am  
I know whose I am and  
I know where I'm going  
I hope you can see that  
Your words changed me  
And I remembered  
You told me  
I am the greatest  
Not because I am better than anybody  
I am the greatest  
Because nobody is greater than me  
I'm going to win the Golden Gloves  
Even though I'm the underdog  
I been training my body and my mind and  
Tomorrow's the real beginning for me  
I guess I just wanted to say thank you and that  
Even though I haven't been back here since the funeral,  
I think about you all the time and  
I love you, Granddaddy Herman.

## The Day Of

I slip on my white Everlast shorts  
lace up my black boxing boots  
get taped up, my hands  
placed firmly  
inside the gloves,  
then walk out  
into the loud  
and massive  
Chicago Stadium  
holding my history  
in one hand  
and my cool  
in the other.



# Cassius Clay vs. Tony Madigan

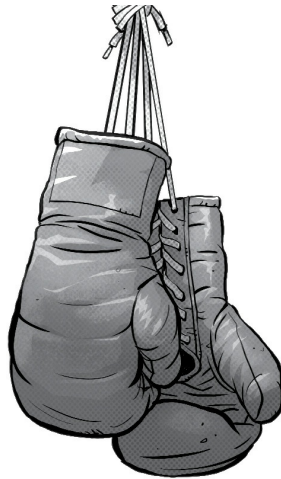
MARCH 25, 1959

Tony was an Aussie  
with wild, stringy hair  
sitting on top  
of a block head  
that housed  
a chin  
made of brick,  
which didn't even flinch  
at the jabs  
I landed, but  
by the middle  
of the third round  
I could tell  
he was getting tired  
of chasing me  
around the ring,  
of me dodging  
his punches,  
so I moved quicker  
punched harder  
and even though  
he got me  
into the corner,  
pummeled me  
with body shots,  
I was too slick for tricks,  
had a swift uppercut  
with his name on it

that made him wince.  
And I talked trash  
the whole time,  
told him if he even dreamed  
he was gonna beat me,  
he better wake up  
and apologize.

Tony Madigan didn't stand a chance  
'cause I was fighting  
for my name  
for my life  
for Papa Cash  
and Momma Bird  
for my granddaddy  
and his granddaddy  
for Miz Alberta  
for Riney and Teenie  
for Big Head Paul  
for Rudy  
even for Corky Butler  
for Louisville  
for America  
for my chance  
for my children  
and their children  
for a chance  
at something better  
at something way  
greater.

## FINAL ROUND



Knowing Cassius Clay made me feel like I was a little part of history. We all felt that way. Of course, Cassius felt like he was a much *bigger* part of history. And he was so right!

After losing in Chicago in 1958 to Kent Green, Cassius went on to win not just one, but *two* Golden Gloves championships, then the Gold Medal at the 1960 Olympics. After that, he turned pro—which meant he started to make a *lot* more than four dollars a fight! His first professional bout was right in our hometown of Louisville. I was there—along with Rudy and a bunch of the guys we grew up with. Cassius won that fight, just like he won his next *nineteen* fights. For the next three years, he never lost in the ring. Not once.

In 1964, when he was just twenty-two, Cassius fought the heavyweight champion Sonny Liston, the Big Bear. People said Liston was *unbeatable*. But Cassius had a plan, and he made sure everybody knew it before he stepped into the ring. “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!” he said. And that’s exactly what he did. Sonny Liston was older and more experienced—but he’d never experienced anything like Cassius Clay! When the seventh-round bell rang, Liston just sat there. He was done. And Cassius was king. The heavyweight champion of the world. Just like he’d predicted. Just like we’d all believed.



With all his success, Cassius never stopped thinking about unfairness and injustice—the way black people were looked down on in Louisville and everywhere he traveled. The day after the Liston fight, Cassius announced that he had joined the Nation of Islam—a movement that was founded to give black people a new sense of pride. A week later, he changed his name to Muhammad Ali. He said that he now thought of Cassius Clay as his “slave name.” From that day on, I never called him Cassius again. (He still called me Lucky, though.)

In 1965, Ali beat Sonny Liston again. First-round knockout. Six months later, he beat Floyd Patterson. Ali was on top of the world and at the top of his game. Nothing could stop him—except a single sheet of paper.

In early 1967, Ali received a draft notice that ordered him to go into the army. That meant he would have to put on a uniform, carry a gun, and probably go to war. But Ali did not believe in war. It was one thing to fight another man in a boxing ring—but the idea of killing people in a far-off country was not in Ali’s nature. He didn’t consider those people his enemies. He had no quarrel with them, he said.



So when the day came for Ali to step forward and enlist, he just refused. To this day, some people say it was a *brave* thing to do, and some say it was the *wrong* thing to do. But, knowing Ali, I realized that it was the *only* thing to do—even though we both understood that it might be the end of his boxing career. It almost was.

Officials took away Ali's heavyweight boxing title and his boxing license. He didn't box again for over three years—a time when he could have defeated more opponents and made millions of dollars. But his *beliefs* were what mattered most to him. He took those years to focus on black pride and racial justice. And he began to realize that there were more important things in life than boxing.

In 1970, after a long legal battle, Ali won his license back, which meant he could finally box again. His first opponent was Jerry Quarry, one of the toughest pros in the world. We all worried that Ali might be rusty after not boxing for so long. And he was—a little. But even a rusty Ali was better than most fighters in their prime—and *definitely* better than Jerry Quarry. Ali won the fight in under three rounds.

Five months later, Ali took on “Smokin’ Joe” Frazier. And lost! It was his first defeat as a pro. But Ali wasn't ready to give up—not by a long shot. In fact, he wanted a rematch with Frazier. Which he got. Which he won, and regained the heavyweight championship title.

In 1974, Ali fought the reigning champ George Foreman, who had never lost in forty-three pro fights. The bout was held in Africa, so they called it the Rumble in the Jungle! For this fight, Ali came up with a new strategy he called rope-a-dope. He cushioned his body against the elastic ropes around the ring so Foreman's punches wouldn't land as hard. By that time, I was writing for a big newspaper, so I was right there ringside for the fight. I'll never forget it! Ali won by a knockout in the eighth round.

In 1975, Ali fought Joe Frazier for a third time—this time in the Philippines. It was called the Thrilla in Manila. The fight went on for fourteen rounds, and at the end, Ali was the winner. A billion people around the world watched that fight on TV. *A billion!* Pretty cool.

I knew Ali couldn't go on winning forever, but the end came sooner than I thought it would.

He lost his next two fights, in 1980 and 1981. They turned out to be the last fights of his career. Outside the ring, I had started to notice a little

trembling in his hands, and sometimes he couldn't form sentences clearly. We both knew something was wrong. Doctors told Ali he had Parkinson's disease, which affects muscles and body movement—and it was only going to get worse.

That news would have stopped most men. But not Ali. He never boxed again, but he kept on fighting. He fought to raise money for famine victims all over the world. He fought to get fifteen American hostages released from Iraq. He became friends with Michael J. Fox, a popular young actor who had Parkinson's disease too. Together, they raised millions of dollars for medical research. Ali worked with the United Nations and became a messenger for peace. In 2005, President Bush awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Ali told me that was one of his proudest days.

Muhammad Ali died in Arizona in 2016. I wasn't there. And in a way, I'm glad. Because I wouldn't want to remember him that way—still and quiet. I want to remember him as the funniest kid in the West End of Louisville—the kid who never stopped running and never stopped talking. Muhammad Ali was a three-time heavyweight champion of the world, and one of the most famous and respected men who ever lived.

He was also a true and loyal friend. That's what I'll remember most.

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To my father, thank you for regularly requiring me to clean our garage, where I first discovered Muhammad Ali's autobiography in a crate of books. And a final thank-you to the American School in London, where I wrote most of this novel, and the countless coffee and tea houses around the city, where I ruminated on this story and buttermilk scones.

*Kwame Alexander*

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