

THE SWIMMING POOL is filled with dog shit and Dee's laughter mocks us at dawn. I've been telling her all week that she's looking like the crackhead she is, laughing at the same joke like it's gonna change. Dee didn't seem to mind that her boyfriend left her, didn't even seem to care when he showed up poolside after making his rounds to every dumpster in the neighborhood last Tuesday, finding feces wrapped up in plastic bags. We heard the splashes at three a.m., followed by his shouts about Dee's unfaithful ass. But mostly we heard Dee's cackles, reminding us how hard it is to sleep when you can't distinguish your own footsteps from your neighbor's.

None of us have ever set foot in the pool for as long as I've been here; maybe because Vernon, the landlord, has never once cleaned it, but mostly because nobody ever taught none of us how to delight in the water, how to swim without gasping for breath, how to love our hair when it is matted and chlorine-soaked. The idea of drowning doesn't bother me, though, since we're made of water anyway. It's kind of like your body overflowing with itself. I think I'd rather go that way than in some haze on the floor of a crusty apartment, my heart out-pumping itself and then stopping.

This morning is different. The way Dee's laugh swirls upward into a high-pitched sort of scream before it wanders into her bel-

low. When I open the door, she's standing there, by the railing, like always. Except today she faces toward the apartment door and the pool keeps her backlit so I can't see her face, can only see the way her cheekbones bob like apples in her hollow skin. I close the door before she sees me.

Some mornings I peek my head into Dee's unlocked door just to make sure she's still breathing, writhing in her sleep. In some ways I don't mind her neurotic laughing fits because they tell me she's alive, her lungs haven't quit on her yet. If Dee's still laughing, not everything has gone to shit.

The knock on our apartment is two fists, four pounds, and I should have known it was coming, but it still makes me jump back from the door. It ain't that I didn't see Vernon making his rounds or the flyer flipping up and drifting back into place on Dee's door as she stared at it, still cackling. I turn and look at my brother, Marcus, on the couch snoring, his nose squirming up to meet his brows.

He sleeps like a newborn, always making faces, his head tilting so I can see his profile, where the tattoo remains taut and smooth. Marcus has a tattoo of my fingerprint just below his left ear and, when he smiles, I find myself drawn right to it, like another eye. Not that either of us has been smiling lately, but the image of it—the memory of the freshly rippling ink below his grin—keeps me coming back to him. Keeps me hoping. Marcus's arms are lined in tattoos, but my fingerprint is the only one on his neck. He told me it was the most painful one he'd ever gotten.

He got the tattoo when I turned seventeen and it was the first day I ever thought he might just love me more than anything, more than his own skin. But now, three months from my eighteenth birthday, when I look at my quivering fingerprint on the edge of his jaw, I feel naked, known. If Marcus ended up bloodied in the street, it wouldn't take much to identify him by the traces of me on his body.

I reach for the doorknob, mumbling, "I got it," as if Marcus was ever actually gonna put feet to floor this early. On the other side of

the wall, Dee's laughter seeps into my gums like salt water, absorbed right into the fleshy part of my mouth. I shake my head and turn back to the door, to my own slip of paper taped to the orange paint.

You don't have to read one of these papers to know what they say. Everyone been getting them, tossing them into the road as if they can *nah, nigga* themselves out of the harshness of it. The font is unrelenting, numbers frozen on the flyer, lingering in the scent of industrial printer ink, where it was inevitably pulled from a pile of papers just as toxic and slanted as this one and placed on the door of the studio apartment that's been in my family for decades. We all known Vernon was a sellout, wasn't gonna keep this place any longer than he had to when the pockets are roaming around Oakland, looking for the next lot of us to scrape out from the city's insides.

The number itself wouldn't seem so daunting if Dee wasn't cracking herself up over it, curling into a whole fit, cementing each zero into the pit of my belly. I whip my head toward her, shout out over the wind and the morning trucks, "Quit laughing or go back inside, Dee. Shit." She turns her head an inch or two to stare at me and smiles wide, opens her mouth until it's a complete oval, and continues her cackle. I rip the rent increase notice from the door and return to our apartment, where Marcus is serene and snoring on the couch.

He's lying there sleeping while this whole apartment collapses around me. We're barely getting by as is, a couple months behind in rent, and Marcus has no money coming in. I'm begging for shifts at the liquor store and counting the number of crackers left in the cupboard. We don't even own wallets, and looking at him, at the haze of his face, I know we won't make it out of this one like we did the last time our world fractured, with an empty photo frame where Mama used to be.

I shake my head at his figure, long and taking over the room, then place the rent increase notice in the center of his chest so it breathes with him. Up and down.

I don't hear Dee no more, so I pull on my jacket and slip out-

side, leaving Marcus to eventually wake to a crumpled paper and more worries than he'll try to handle. I walk along the railing lined in apartments and open Dee's door. She's there, somehow asleep and twitching on the mattress when just a few minutes ago she was roaring. Her son, Trevor, sits on a stool in the small kitchen eating off-brand Cheerios out of their box. He's nine and I've known him since he was born, watched him shoot up into the lanky boy he is now. He's munching on the cereal and waiting for his mother to wake up, even though it'll probably be hours before her eyes open and see him as more than a blur.

I step inside, quietly walking up to him, grabbing his backpack from the floor and handing it to him. He smiles at me, the gaps in his teeth filled in with soggy Cheerio bits.

"Boy, you gotta be getting to school. Don't worry 'bout your mama, c'mon, I'll take you."

Trevor and I emerge from the apartment, his hand in mine. His palms feel like butter, smooth and ready to melt in the heat of my hand. We walk together toward the metal stairwell, painted lime green and chipped, all the way down to the ground floor, past the shit pool, and through the metal gate that spits us right out onto High Street.

High Street is an illusion of cigarette butts and liquor stores, a winding trail to and from drugstores and adult playgrounds masquerading as street corners. It has a childlike kind of flair, like the perfect landscape for a scavenger hunt. Nobody ever knows when the hoods switch over, all the way up to the bridge, but I've never been up there so I can't tell you if it makes you want to skip like it does on our side. It is everything and nothing you'd expect with its funeral homes and gas stations, the street sprinkled in houses with yellow shining out the windows.

"Mama say Ricky don't come around no more, so I got the cereal all to myself."

Trevor lets go of my hand, slippery, sauntering ahead, his steps buoyant. Watching him, I don't think anybody but Trevor and me understand what it's like to feel ourselves moving, like really notice it. Sometimes I think this little kid might just save me from the swallow of our gray sky, but then I remember that Marcus used to be that small, too, and we're all outgrowing ourselves.

We take a left coming out of the Regal-Hi Apartments and keep walking. I follow Trevor, crossing behind him as he ignores the light and the rush of cars because he knows anyone would stop for him, for those glossy eyes and that sprint. His bus stop is on the side of the street we just crossed from, but he likes to walk on the side where our park is, the one where teenagers shoot hoops without nets every morning, colliding with each other on the court and falling into fits of coughs. Trevor slows, his eyes fixated on this morning's game. It looks like girls on boys and nobody is winning.

I grab Trevor's hand, pulling him forward. "You not gonna catch the bus if you don't move those feet."

Trevor drags, his head twisting to follow the ball spin up, down, squeaking between hands and hoops.

"Think they'd let me play?" Trevor's face wobbles as he sucks on the insides of his cheeks in awe.

"Not today. See, they don't got a bus to catch and your mama sure won't want you out here getting all cold missing school like that."

January in Oakland is a funny kind of cold. It's got a chill, but it really ain't no different from any other month, clouds covering all the blue, not cold enough to warrant a heavy coat, but too cold to show much skin. Trevor's arms are bare, so I shrug off my jacket, wrapping it around his shoulders. I grab his other hand and we continue to walk, beside each other now.

We hear the bus before we see it, coming around the corner, and I whip my head quick, see the number, the bulk of this big green thing rumbling toward us.

“Let’s cross, come on, move those feet.”

Ignoring the open road and the cars, we run across the street, the bus hurtling toward us and then pulling over to the bus stop. I nudge Trevor forward, into the line shuffling off the curb and into the mouth of the bus.

“You go on and read a book today, huh?” I call out to him as he climbs on.

He looks back at me, his small hand raising up just enough that it could be called a wave goodbye or a salute or a boy getting ready to wipe his nose. I watch him disappear, watch the bus tilt back up onto its feet, groan, and pull away.

A couple minutes later, my own bus creaks to a stop in front of me. A man standing near me wears sunglasses he doesn’t need in this gloom, and I let him climb on first, then join, looking around and finding no seats because this is a Thursday morning and we all got places to be. I squeeze between bodies and find a pocket of space toward the back, standing and holding on to the metal pole as I wait for the vehicle to thrust me forward.

In the ten minutes it takes to get to the other side of East Oakland, I slip into the lull of the bus, the way it rocks me back and forth like I imagine a mother rocks a child when she is still patient enough to not start shaking. I wonder how many of these other people, their hair shoved into hats, with lines moving in all directions tracing their faces like a train station map, woke up this morning to a lurching world and a slip of paper that shouldn’t mean more than a tree got cut down somewhere too far to give a shit about. I almost miss the moment to pull the wire and push open the doors to fresh Oakland air and the faint scent of oil and machinery from the construction site across the street from La Casa Taquería.

I get off the bus and approach the building, the blackout windows obscuring the inside from sight and its blue awning familiar. I grab the handle to the restaurant door, open it, and immediately smell

something thundering and loud in the darkness of the shop. The chairs are turned over on the tables, but the place is alive.

“You don’t turn the lights on for me no more?” I call out, knowing Alé is only a few feet away but she feels farther in the dark. She steps out from a doorway, her shadow groping for the light switch, and we are illuminated.

Alejandra’s hair is silky and black, spilling from the bun on top of her head. Her skin is oily, slick with the sweat of the kitchen she has spent the past twenty minutes in. Her white T-shirt competes with Marcus’s shirts for most oversized and inconspicuous, making her look boyish and cool in a way that I never could. Her tattoos peek out from all parts of her and sometimes I think she is art, but then she starts to move and I remember how bulky and awkward she is, her feet stepping big.

“You know I could kick you outta here real quick.” Alé strides closer, looks like she’s about to perform the black man’s handshake, until she realizes I am not my brother and instead opens her arms. I am mesmerized by her, the way she fills up space in the room like she fills up that drooping shirt. Here, I settle into the most familiar place that I have ever lived, her chest against my ear, warm and thumping.

“You best have some food in there,” I tell her, pulling away and turning to strut into the kitchen. I like to swing my hips when I walk around Alé, makes her call me her chava.

Alé watches me move and her eyes dart. She starts to run toward the kitchen door just as I rush there, racing, pushing each other to squeeze inside the doorway, laughing until we cry, spreading out on the floor as we step on each other’s limbs and don’t care about the bruises that’ll paint us blue tomorrow. Alé beats me and stands at the stove scooping food into bowls while I’m on my knees heaving. She chuckles slyly as I get up and then hands me a bowl and spoon.

“Huevos rancheros,” she says, sweat drip-dripping down her nose. It is hot and fuming, deep red with eggs on top.

Alé cooks for me at least once a week and, when Marcus is with me, he always asks what it is, regardless of whether or not she's made it before. He likes fucking with her as much as he likes rapping off-beat and smooth-talking.

I hop onto the counter, feeling something seep into my jeans and ignoring it. Spooning the food into my mouth, I let the heat take over my tongue, while I watch Alé lean her back against the stove across from me, the steam from our bowls floating upward and forming a cloud around the ceiling.

"You found a job yet?" Alé asks, her mouth smeared in sauce like she's drawn outside the lines of her lips.

I shake my head, dip a finger into the bowl and lick it. "Been everywhere in this city but they all so hung up on the high school dropout shit that they won't even look at me."

Alé swallows and nods.

"Worst part is, Marcus won't even get off his ass and try."

She rolls her eyes, but doesn't say anything, as if I won't catch it.

"What?" I ask.

"It's just, he doing his best, you know, and it's only been a few months since he quit his job. He young too, can't blame him for not wanting to spend all his time working, and y'all are fine for now with you taking a shift at the liquor store a couple days a week. You don't gotta dig up this shit." She speaks with her mouth full, red sauce leaking from the corner.

I'm off the counter now, fully aware of how soaked the back of my jeans are. I slam my bowl on the table, hear it clink, and wish it would have shattered. She has stopped eating and watches me, twisting her chain around her finger.

Alé makes a small noise, like a gurgle in the throat that turns into a cough.

"Fuck you," I spit.

"Come on, Kiara. You don't gotta do this. It's funeral day, we should be twirling in the streets but you over here about to break a

damn bowl 'cause you mad you ain't got no job? Most of us out here just tryna get some work. You ain't special."

I glance between her and the floor, her shirt glued to her skin with sweat. In these moments, I remember that Alé had her own world without me, that there was a before me and maybe there will be an after. Either way, I'm not about to stand in this steaming kitchen while the only person that got any right to say my name refuses to see how close I am to falling apart, to letting loose like Dee.

Alé steps forward, grabs my wrist, looks at me, like *Don't do this*. I'm already pushing out the door, my legs betraying my breath, moving quick. She is behind me, reaching out her hand and missing my sleeve, trying again, and finally grasping the fabric. I am being spun around, her face too close, looking at me with all the pity of an owned tongue looking at a caged one. I've let her save me more times than I've forgiven Marcus and I can almost see her slight shake under that shirt.

Her lips barely move as she says it. "It's funeral day."

Alé tells me this like it means shit when her fingernails are short and smell like coriander and mine are sharp and dangerous. But then the pit of her chin dimples and she is everything.

"You don't even get it," I say, thinking of the paper on our door this morning. Her face stitches together.

I shake my head and try to wipe off whatever look has imprinted on my face. "Whatever." I exhale and Alé frowns, but before she can continue to fight me on it, I reach up to the tender patch on her side and tickle her. She shrieks, laughs that surprising girly laugh she produces when she's afraid I'm gonna tickle her again, and I release her. "Now we gonna go or what?"

Alé swings one of her arms around my shoulder and pulls me with her out the door, toward the bus stop. We pass the construction and start to jog until we are suddenly sprinting, racing down the street, not stopping to check for cars as we cross, the singsong of horns trailing us.

JOY FUNERAL HOME is one of many death hotels in East Oakland. It sits on the corner of Seminary Avenue and some other street nobody bothers to learn the name of, welcoming in bodies and more bodies. Alé and I frequent it every couple months, when the employees turn over because they can't stomach another brushing of a corpse beside a plate of Safeway cheese. We've been to enough funerals in our lives to know nobody grieving wants no damn cheese.

Alé and I walk up to MacArthur Boulevard, where we catch the NL, hopping on with Clipper cards we stole from some elementary school lost and found. The bus is almost empty because we are young and foolish while everybody else is sitting at a desk in some tech building, staring at a screen and wishing they could taste the air when it is fresh and tranquil. We don't got nowhere to be and we like it like that.

Alé is one of the lucky ones. Her family's restaurant is a neighborhood staple, and even though they can't afford more than the one bedroom above the shop, she's never been hungry a day in her life. It's all degrees of being alive out here and every time I hug her or watch her skate down the sidewalk, I can feel how strong her heartbeat is. It doesn't matter how lucky you are, though, because you still

gotta work day in and day out trying to stay alive while someone else falls through the cracks, ashes scattered in the bay.

Thursdays and Sundays are the only days Alé will come crawling around town with me. She normally stays to help her mom run the restaurant, standing over a stove or waitressing. When I'm lonely, I come watch her do this, observing the way she can sweat nonstop for hours without even moving.

I stare at Alé as she looks out her window, the bus shaking us into each other and away. We're at a red light when she nudges me.

"They really tryna replace Obama with that woman." She nods her head toward the poster pasted in some hardware store window with Hillary Clinton's face creased and smiling. We're more than a year away from the election, but it's already started, all the rumors and talk coinciding with rallies and protests and black men shot down. I shake my head, the bus moving again, before settling my eyes back on Alé.

"You not even wearing black, girl, what you doing?" I ask.

She's still in her white shirt and shorts.

"You ain't either."

When she says this, I look down at my own gray shirt and black jeans. "I'm halfway there."

Alé lets out a small laugh. "This a hood funeral, anyway. Nobody gonna question what we're wearing."

And suddenly we're both giggling because she's right and we must have known this, since we've never shown up to a funeral in anything but jeans and stained T-shirts, except for when Alé's abuelo died two years ago and we wore his shirts, ones that had yellowed from age and smelled only of cigarettes and clay from the deepest, most fertile part of the ground. No mortician ever interrogated the mourner's apparel just like they don't stop and ask about no stab wounds. I showed up to my own daddy's funeral in a neon-pink tank top and nobody said a word.

Mama blamed the prison for Daddy's death, which meant she blamed the people who made it possible for Daddy to have ended up there in the first place—which meant she blamed the streets. Daddy wasn't a hustler or a dealer and I only ever saw him high once, smoking a bowl while he sat by the shit pool with Uncle Ty. It didn't matter though, because Mama could only see the day Daddy got picked up, his friends' twitching mouths when the cops appeared and slammed them to the plaster walls. It didn't matter what they did or didn't do because Mama needed to blame someone, something, and her skin was too soft, too tender to handle blaming the world itself, the click of the handcuffs, the ease with which the cops slid them onto his wrists.

Daddy got sick when he was in San Quentin, started pissing blood and begged to see the doctor for weeks, the burn getting more persistent, until they finally let him. The doctor told him it was probably just the food, that sometimes it does that to you. He gave Daddy some painkillers and pills called alpha blockers to help him piss easier. It took the worst parts of it away, but I think Daddy still found blood in the toilet for years after he came home and never said nothing. Three years after he was released, his back started hurting so bad that he could barely walk to and from the 7-Eleven he worked at.

We took him to the doctor when his legs started swelling and they told us it was his prostate. The cancer was far enough along that there was really no shot at improvement, so Daddy refused when Mama begged him to do the chemo and the radiation therapy. He said he wasn't gonna leave her in no debt from his medical bills.

It was a quick death that felt slow. Marcus disappeared for most of it, off with Uncle Ty. I don't blame him for not wanting to watch. Mama and I witnessed the whole thing, spent hours every night wiping down his body with a cool rag and singing to him. It was a relief when it finally ended, four years after he was released from San Quentin, and we could stop waking up in the middle of the

night thinking his body had gone cold. By the time the funeral came around, I was too exhausted to give a shit about wearing black and part of me wished I had stayed away like Marcus. Death is easier to live through unseen.

The bus rolls to a stop on Seminary and spits us out like the bay spits out salt. We hop from the bus to the curb and wait those few moments to watch it stand back up and continue on its path. The left tires fall into a series of potholes, coming back out again with a cough.

Alé puts her arm around me, pulling me close, and I remember how cold I've been without my jacket or her chest. My lips ache and I think they must be purple, nearing blue, but I pass a window of a liquor store and my reflection tells me they're still pink, the same color as Marcus's mouth was this morning, sucking in air and snoring. Alé and I walk together out of sync. She moves kinda like the Hulk with giant steps and each half of her body striding, leaving the other part behind, while I take small steps beside her. I lean on her and it don't matter how unbelievably mismatched we are because we are still moving.

We pause in front of Joy's, watch people in various shades of black, gray, blue, jeans, dresses, joggers, move sluggish through the doors, their heads slightly bent. The door to the funeral parlor is double-sided and dark, probably bullet-proof glass, and, when Alé looks at me, there's something that mimics guilt in her eyes. "Buffet or closet?" she asks, her mouth still close enough to me that I can see the way her tongue darts around in her mouth when she talks.

"Closet."

We both nod, copying all the others: heads down.

Alé squeezes my hand once and then walks inside ahead of me, disappearing behind the glass. I wait a few seconds and pull open the door.

The moment I enter the building, I'm met with two sets of eyes. A

staple of most funerals, the blown-up photo of the bodies that lie in coffins some small number of feet away stares at me. There are two of them, but only one picture, like a miniature billboard. One is a woman, her eyelashes short ghosts framing her eyes as she stares at the child in her arms.

The child is not even large enough to be given the title of child. She is an infant, a small person bundled in what looks like a tablecloth but is actually a onesie: red and checkered. Neither of them smiles, drooling in the intoxication of a bond too intimate for me, a stranger, to watch. I want to look away, but the infant's nose keeps calling me back; it is small and pointed, brown but slightly red, like the baby has been outside for too long. I want to warm her, make her return to her color, but she is so far behind this cardboard and you cannot resurrect the dead, even when they have so much life left over.

I taste my tears before I feel them and this is funeral day: touching death and eating lunch. Pretending to cry until we are truly sobbing. Until we have shook hands with every ghost of this building and they have given us permission to wear their clothes like walking relics of their lives, or at least I would like to believe that those are the whispers that creep up my spine as the tears fall.

A hand touches my shoulder and I squirm.

"They were too young." The man behind me is maybe seventy or so, the silver in his beard appearing too bright in this room.

He is wearing a suit and tie while I shrink into my shirt.

"Yes." This is all I can think to say back, not knowing them past their faces and their names, which I don't even know how to pronounce.

I'm about to ask how it happened, how these beings got swept into a casket, but it doesn't matter. Some of us got restaurants and full-grown children and some of us got babies who won't never outgrow their onesies. The man leaves, his tie swinging, his handprint a cold spot on my shoulder.

I continue past the photo, through the corridor to the last door

in the hallway, which opens up to racks of clothes and the scent of bleach and perfume.

It is a closet of death, welcoming me like it knows we are kindred. I weave through the line of fabric, dragging my hand across the clothes, moving toward the back row. A blazer has fallen off the hanger and sits on the floor, gathering dust. I pick it up, shake it a little, slip it on over my shirt. It's oversized in that way that makes you feel like the fabric is holding you, like two arms creeping around your chest, warm. I don't take it off.

Somewhere in this building, Alé is standing in a chapel for the public viewing, staring at the bodies, watching the service, crying. She's probably already in the back of the room with the food spread, grabbing a plate, some napkins, and beginning to pile it up, discreetly of course, masking her pain in a full belly. Soon she will slip out the back, exit Joy's, and wait for me at San Antonio Park.

I keep sifting through the racks, trying to find something that reminds me of her. I can't imagine Alé in nothing this formal, until I find a men's black sweater. There is a single hole in the wrist, an invitation for its taking, and it is softer than anything I have ever owned, plain in the way that everything Alé accessorizes herself with is plain. She doesn't need anything extra, with her ink and the intricacies of her face.

I've done my part now, gotten us the clothing I should've worn to my own father's funeral, but I don't want to leave. I don't want to walk out that door and pass by people with large hands who will touch me briefly and hum a sigh like we are sharing our own internal earthquakes, braving them together. I slide down to the floor, burrow into the racks of black where I'm encased in darkness. It is a relief to be removed from sight. Funeral day is a reckoning, when we mimic thieves and really just find excuses for our tears, then light up, eat until we have never felt fuller, and find somewhere to dance. Funeral day is the culmination of all our past selves, when we hold our own

memorials for people we never buried right. The funeral always ends, though, and we all gotta get back to the hustle, so I breathe in one last whiff of this room, and get up.

When I make it outside, the sky is blinding. Everything is moving fast, cars and motorcycles stirring wind and dirt like they have forgotten how to stand still. Sometimes I don't remember how to move my legs, but my body always surprises me, moving anyway, moving without my permission. I start walking down the street toward the park that sits there, in the middle of the freeway and stop signs and small condos that house more people than they can fit.

Alé is sitting on one of the swings, a paper plate balancing on top of her knees, but she isn't eating. She's looking up at the sky, which is more of a fog than a cloud now, and I think she's smiling.

I walk up the slight hill to her and when I am close enough, I toss her the black sweater. It lands at her feet. Alé picks it up, that small smile morphing into a dance across her cheeks and this is funeral day, when we are free to own all the dead things, all the sweaters that were resigned to ghosthood revived.

"It was Sonny Rollins. On a loop," she says, and the smile is a familiar reflection of my own face. We always listen to what music they play during the wake, not because it says anything about the lost life, but because it says something about the people who were left behind.

"What song?" I ask her, wanting to hear it in my eardrums, the whine of the saxophone, the grainy sound of my daddy's stereo deep inside a memory with no edges, still pure.

"God Bless the Child." She shakes one of her knees a little as she tells me, the plate tipping slightly.

I sit down on the swing next to Alé's and she moves the plate of food from her knees to my lap. There's cheese and chips and celery that she has covered in peanut butter because she knows it's my favorite. We begin to stuff ourselves, shoveling food, crunching, jaws and tongues and swallows creating a chorus to Sonny's jazz tap that plays on repeat in my head as it must have in the funeral chapel. Alé

and I both believe that funerals either have the most ingenious DJs or act as soundtracks for some hollow unwinding, a catalyst to sobs and suicide notes.

“Vernon’s selling the Regal-Hi,” I say, crunching on my last chip.

Alé’s eyes are on me, waiting.

“They raising rent over double.” I don’t know how to look at her when I say it, feels like confronting myself. Like it might just be too real.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” I look up into the sky. “That’s why Marcus needs to get a job.”

Alé reaches out for my hand and touches it lightly, at the wrist. I wonder if she can feel my pulse, if she’s searching for it. “What you gonna do?”

“I don’t know. But if we don’t figure something out, we on the streets.”

I begin to move my legs back and forth off-tempo, staying low to the ground. Alé pulls papers and a small jar with clumps of weed out of her pocket. I like watching her roll, the meditation of it and the smell when it’s sweet and unassuming, kind of like if cinnamon was mixed with a redwood tree. I never figured out how to do it right, how to make sure the joint was tight enough to not unravel, but loose enough to breathe. Watching Alé is better, reminds me of the way my mama used to fold her clothes, so determined to make the crease just right.

She pauses to look over at me. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out.”

She sprinkles weed from the jar onto a paper and I catch a hint of lavender. She calls the lavender-infused weed her Sunday Shoes and it don’t even gotta make sense because when I suck it in, blow it out, I imagine my feet cased in something lavender calm and holy. She finishes, holding it up to inspect it, small smile, her lips almost pouting in their pride.

She pulls a lighter out and I cup my hand around the joint, a bar-

rier from the wind. Alé's thumb presses on the lighter until it sparks and the base of the flame is the same shade of blue our pool was before all the shit. She guides the flame to the tip of the joint until it finally catches.

We pass the joint back and forth until it's too small to fit between our lips without crumbling. I've never really liked weed, but it makes me feel closer to Alé, so I light up with her and try to sink so deep into the high that it's all I feel.

Alé begins to swing her legs, me following her lead, going skyward. At the top, I think I might just enter one of those clouds. I look down, see a tent behind the basketball courts and an old man pissing by a tree, not bothering to look around and see who is watching. I aspire to be so reckless, so unassuming that I could take a piss in San Antonio Park at noon on a Thursday and not even look up.

"You know what I been thinking?" Alé asks me.

We're on opposite ends of the sky, swinging toward each other and missing, and for the first time all day I'm not thinking about the paper taped to our door, about Marcus's sleeping face, about how wide Dee's mouth opens.

"What you been thinking?"

"Don't nobody ever fix none of these damn roads."

She says it and I immediately begin to laugh, thinking she was about to tell me some philosophical wondering about the world.

"You don't even got a car, what you worried about?" I yell back to her, across the wind and the space between our swings.

Even as I say it, looking out at the streets that extend from the park like the legs of a spider, I see what she means. Chunks of road sit beside holes they left behind, where wheels of broken-down Volkswagens dip in and for a second I don't know if they're gonna pull back out until they do, the only remnant of distress left in the slight rattle of the bumper. All the holes in Oakland never seem to leave nobody stuck for long, an illusion of brokenness. Or maybe that's just for the cars.

“Don’t you ever think about how none of the streets ’round here been redone for decades?” Alé, a skater to the core, spends more time dipping in and out of potholes than I ever have.

“Why it gotta matter? The roads ain’t hurting nobody.”

“Don’t matter. I’m just saying it ain’t like this nowhere else, you know? Why Broadway not this torn up? Or S.F.? ’Cause they putting their money in the city just like they putting their money into downtown. Don’t you got a problem with that?” Alé’s whole body has risen from its slouch and we’re both slowing down now, returning from our sky.

“No. I don’t got a problem with that, just like I don’t got a problem with Uncle Ty buying a Maserati and a mansion down in L.A. and leaving us out here alone. Just like I don’t got a problem with Marcus spitting rhymes in a studio while I’m just tryna pay our rent. It ain’t my place to have a problem with somebody else’s survival. If the city get they money from paying to smooth over the roads on some rich-ass street, then they should go ahead and do that. Lord knows I won’t be thinking ’bout nobody else if someone offers me a wad of cash.”

I wiggle my toes in my Sunday Shoes as the swing comes to a halt and I feel Alé’s eyes on me, determined.

“I don’t believe none of that,” she says.

“What you mean you don’t believe it?”

She shakes her head, her own high making her slow. “Nah, you got too much heart to be a sellout, Ki, you ain’t cruel enough for none of that. I know you wouldn’t go leaving Marcus or Trevor or me just to make bank.”

I’d like to think she’s wrong, but if she was then I would stay on these swings all day, get so high I don’t have to think about nothing but Alé’s tattoos and how the streets are fragmenting and will keep disintegrating until we are walking on dirt.

Instead, I think of Marcus, how we used to stand on street corners trying to sell paintings I made on cardboard. It barely made us enough to buy more paint, but Marcus and I were in it together,

choosing each other. It's time I go tell him I can't be doing all the hard shit for him if he ain't gonna do nothing for me. Tell him it's time to put the mic down and face these streets like I've been for the last six months.

"I gotta go find Marcus," I say, hopping from the swing set and seeing the world fuzz, go in and out of focus, all of it sharp yet spinning. I leave her there, on the swings, a puff of smoke exiting her lips like she was holding it in this whole time, and she don't even have to look at me again because now this blazer smells like her Sunday Shoes and, today, on funeral day, that is all I need.

IT SOUNDS LIKE someone is giving birth. I descend the stairs to the recording studio cautiously, not sure if I'm about to find some strange woman with her thighs above her head, erupting.

Instead, the steps give way to the basement filled with Marcus's best friend's girlfriend—Shauna—moaning, throwing Taco Bell to-go cups into a trash can with more force than she needs to, and waiting for someone to ask her what's wrong. The remaining soda in the cups dribbles onto the beige rug and nobody asks Shauna nothing because Marcus is rapping in the next room and they're all trying to find a single word in his mouth's jumble.

After I left Alé at the park earlier today I went home to find Marcus, but he wasn't there. So I flipped through the yellow pages for hours planning where to go to ask for a job until it started to get dark and I knew I could find him at the studio. Now I'm preparing to enter the boys' sanctuary to see if I can get Marcus to hold me close again, like Alé does, and figure out how to escape this mess.

Marcus's best friend is Cole and his recording studio is hidden in the corner of his mom's basement, behind a closed door, the house stuffed on a deserted street in the Fruitvale district, a short walk from the Regal-Hi and East Oakland's own sort of downtown: always alive. The boys all pay Cole for studio hours, trading off nights of the week to record songs that never go further than SoundCloud.

Shauna's newborn lies sleeping in a crib in the center of the room while Shauna huffs, groans, tries to drown out Marcus's quick talking, but I'm the only one who really hears her. I reach the bottom of the stairs, the ceiling only seeming to get lower, competing voices filling up the empty space until the whole room is about to burst. The basement is smothering, but my brother's voice is the flat familiar that makes me remember why I stay down here, breathing this recycled Old Spice air and listening to Shauna's noises.

I enter the studio and I'm immediately thrust into a world of men and music that leaks into every corner of the room, some track Marcus is laying down in the booth. I see him there, behind the glass, eyes closed, wingspan stretching into some mythical version of my brother's embrace. Tupac might just be shivering in his grave because my brother don't know how to spit, and the only words I can hear in the mess of his tongue are *bitch* and *ho* and *this nigga got chains* and I wanna tell him this room knows how he hurled into our toilet for two weeks after Daddy died because his body cannot bear grief. This room knows how the only chains he got are from those machines that spit out plastic containers for fifty cents at the arcade. This room knows the only bitch he got is me and I'm shrinking back, trying to disappear myself into the doorway the way Marcus disappears us in his lyrics.

The studio isn't clean or expensive enough to be considered a recording studio by any professional standards, but my brother and his boys have made it into a haven and decided they are godly in this room, the same way I felt godly at the height of the swing with Alé, before reality hit. An illusion that just keeps feeding itself.

Marcus recedes into silence and the beat stops still, his eyes settling on me through the glass. The boys chorus my name, Tony standing up from the couch to put his arm around me, his body engulfing mine in its muscle mass and quiet. Marcus nods to me from behind the glass and I exit Tony's arms, pushing open the door to the record-

ing booth, where I find my brother's warmth, his body beyond the beat.

My fist hits his stomach lightly, but all I feel is the tight push of his muscles. Marcus always flexing. "Hey, we gotta talk." I try to whisper so the boys won't have to hear, even though Cole can hear it all through his headphones anyway.

"Let's talk." Marcus's face tells me all I need to know. It's shut, every cavity of feeling closed down.

"Look, Mars, we don't got enough money for no rent increase. You over here without a job and I can't handle it no more, so—"

Like most days, the moment I try to speak, Marcus inserts himself. His voice fills up the whole room and it's like he's gone to war with the air, leaving me with nothing. Marcus pretending I am not standing here, that the paper I left him this morning ain't nothing but a lost cat flyer.

"Aight, Ki, don't be going on this *I don't got a job* bullshit. I got a job, so how 'bout you go on home and let me finish my track. Shit."

He doesn't even take a beat before he's rambling about his new verses, talking about how he's gonna make it big.

It didn't used to be like this.

About six months ago, Marcus was at a bar when he heard our uncle Ty's voice come on, rapping the same way he always has. Marcus looked him up and found out he had an album coming out, that he was signed with Dr. Dre's label and making bank in L.A. It unleashed something in Marcus and the next day he quit his job at Panda Express and started hanging with Cole every day, hell-bent on becoming Uncle Ty. I tried to give him his space, let him feel his rage, but it's been too long now and whether he likes it or not, he needs to start acting like a grown man again.

I look up at him, trying to search for a little bit of me in his face and finding nothing but a fingerprint beneath his ear.

He sighs. "It's fine, Ki."

"We don't got enough money to make rent every month as is. In two weeks when we out on our asses, pretty sure it ain't gonna be just fine." I slip my hands back into my pockets so he doesn't see the mess I've made of them, picking at them while his words stamped. "I'm out looking for jobs before you wake up every morning and all you ever do is hang out with Cole and Tony and pretend like it's getting you somewhere. You ain't even acting like my brother no more."

"Oh, we back on this shit." His eyes glaze over, stuck in the same place on the wall.

"Marcus, please." I don't want to beg him, not while Tony and Cole are on the other side of the glass, snickering and sipping on their beers.

For the first time today, Marcus looks right at me, stares, and finally his eyes are familiar. This time when he speaks, his voice shakes.

"You know when we were younger and Uncle Ty took us to that skate park and we'd go down and run at the wall, tryna climb back out? And you were smaller so you kept on tryin' but you couldn't reach the rim of the slope and you kept sliding back down and then you'd sit in the middle, all these skaters whipping in and out, flying around you, and you'd cry."

He doesn't say it like a question, but I know it is one. He's asking if I remember the burn on my palms or the fear throbbing behind my forehead.

"I remember."

Marcus hesitates, licking his lips, and continues. "I didn't help you get up and it ain't because I didn't care or I wanted to win, nah, it wasn't like that. I was just waiting for Uncle Ty to show me some tricks and if I helped you, waited for you, I woulda missed my shot. You get that, right?"

The air between us is thick. He is asking for my permission.

"I guess."

My mouth is dry, searching in the drought between us for some-

thing solid and full, before I look up at him and breathe in his crumpling face.

"It's okay, Mars." There's something about the way his eyes cave inward that makes me want to erase all of it, simply let it go. "I want you to shoot your shot or whatever. It's just . . ." I glance toward the other side of the glass where Tony is staring straight at us. "Never mind," I say. "Really." I look away from Marcus.

He waves the tension out of the recording booth. "Now can I get a beer or you gonna stand here sulkin'n shit?" His body straightens, the hurt disappearing and leaving only a tilted smirk. I nod, following him out of the booth to join the circle around the soundboard, where Marcus opens a can and chugs. I sit in between Marcus and Tony, across from Cole, trying to figure out if Cole's got a problem with his ears or something, why he don't respond to Shauna's bellows.

Cole is lengthy, his entire body appearing like it could stretch all the way to the ceiling if you pulled hard enough. His cheeks dip into his face and I know he's sucking them in, making them touch his grill. Cole is cocky in that way that might just be endearing because, in our crew, he has made it, can support his baby mama and afford a car, even if he's still living in his mama's house. He says it's by choice and the way his mama hugs him makes me believe it.

I catch Marcus staring at me, watching me sip the beer Tony gave me, and making sure I don't grab another can. He doesn't like when I drink. The minute I lock eyes with him, he looks away.

Marcus returns to the recording booth after he finishes his beer and we all watch his head nod, saliva flying out his lips, chest a bulk of muscle he worked harder for than anything else he's got. I'm alone with the boys and Tony's left arm hangs at his side. He reaches up to lift it around me a couple times and then retreats before patting my leg twice. His hand is heavy. When Tony speaks, his voice comes out with a hint of a growl, like a lion's been hiding deep inside his throat, attempting to claw its way out.

"You busy tonight?"

Tony makes the move, pulls his arm around my shoulders so I'm scrunched against his chest and my mouth is muffled by his denim jacket, his body heat suffocating. Tony taps my shoulder to the beat of the track and I feel like I can't escape, Marcus's verses sneaking up my spine. I shift my eyes toward Tony's and he's looking at me, always staring.

"You think you could talk to Marcus? Try to get him to look for a job?" I ask, acutely aware of Tony's hand slipping down my arm.

"You ain't even answered my question."

He smells like eggnog even though it's past Christmas and I'm not sure if I like it or not. Tony's had a thing for me for months, ever since he and Marcus became friends, and he's the only guy who has ever asked me a question and wanted to hear my answer. I let him try to hold my hand when he comes over, but I still don't understand him, why he can't seem to let me go when I've never given him a reason to hold on.

"I don't know if I'm busy, Tony, I got other shit to worry about."

I gaze into my lap, stare at my hands. Even with Marcus's belts gaining volume and Tony's stare carving into my face, his fingers tracing my arm, I can't seem to think about anything but my fingers. I used to keep my nails real long, pointed. I'd gnaw on them to make sure the tip was just right, like talons.

Now I'm itching to hide my hands or maybe sit on them, but I know that would make Tony nervous, make him think I was hiding from him, so instead I keep them in my lap. The nails are jagged, ripped along the edges. They look naked, defenseless, like the kind of nails six-year-olds have when they too busy playing cops and robbers to remember they gotta be ready for all the real cops and robbers.

"Okay," Tony says, his mouth close enough to my cheek that I can feel his breath. "I'll talk to Marcus if you come over tonight."

I tilt my head to look at Tony and his eyes are doe-like, hopeful. He

is a hulk of something subtle and soft and I don't think nobody else in this room has ever listened to my breath like he does.

"I guess," I say, dipping out from under his arm. Cole opens his eyes at my movement and lifts his headphones from his ears.

"Where you goin', Ki? You tired of us already?" Cole shows his whole grill.

"You know I'm never tired of you." I smile at him. "Saw the baby, she real cute."

Cole sits up straighter against the couch, stops smiling and replaces the expression with a mellow kind of wonder, dreaming with his eyes open.

"Yeah, she beautiful."

Marcus comes back out from the recording booth to grab another beer, snickers, his eyebrows springing up. "If only yo girl could get it together and stop complaining."

Shauna's face flashes in my mind, her eye hunger and her moans. Cole emerges from his daze and lets out a noise, not a sound of agreement, but not a defense either. Marcus's tattoo is squirming again, trying to spring out of his skin. He looks toward me, the two of us the only ones standing.

"You leaving?" I'm not used to him all eyes on me like this, his lips puffing like a pre-tantrum child, like he don't want me to leave.

"Thinkin' about it," I tell him.

He tilts the can back and empties it into his throat. "Come here." He leads me back into the recording booth, turning to look at me. I watch him, my arms growing bumps, hair standing up, like they just remembered how bare they are behind the glass, without Tony's body heat.

"You don't gotta leave," he says.

"Why you care?" Sometimes, when I'm with Marcus, I revert to my ten-year-old little-sister self staring up at my big brother, to who I was before all our shit got messy, before my fingernails started rip-

ping and Marcus decided he needed a beat more than he needed my hand to hold.

Marcus grimaces, his jaw winding up so it can unleash itself and suddenly my fingerprint is moving, roaring on his neck. "What you mean? I gotta care, Ki. I'm doing this 'cause I'm gonna get us a whole different life, like Uncle Ty. You just gotta trust me, aight? Give me one month to drop the album. You can handle one month, yeah?"

Marcus is better at talking than he's ever been at rapping and this is no different. My fingerprint has found legs and is moving quicker than his breath.

"One month."

I let him pull me into a hug that feels more like a choke than a goodbye.

On the other side of the glass, Tony and Cole are chuckling about something, punching each other and acting like they ain't been listening to us. Tony sees me and lights up.

"I gotta go," I say.

"You coming over later, though?" His height contrasts with the childlike demeanor, the boy waiting for his reward. I know it ain't right to let him keep doing this, hoping I'm ever going to lean into his chest for anything more than warmth. I start walking toward the door that leads back to Shauna, the stairs, the city.

"Maybe," I tell him, pausing to watch Marcus inside the glass for one last verse.

He's standing there, tilting side to side, beginning to rhyme, and I catch only one thing before I exit: *My bitches don't know nothing, don't know nothing*. I am trying to decipher the fallacies in that, the torn edges of memories that may belong to his words, but all I find is nothing, don't know nothing. Nothing.

Shauna is still moaning in the basement, leaning over to grab a breast pump from the floor. I don't say anything, but I bend over to pick up a pair of soiled boxers, making a pile for Cole's dirty clothes

and moving the pillows from the floor back to the sinking couch. Shauna looks up at me and we make eye contact. There is something in her face that makes me think she's lonely, but I don't know what it is; maybe the way her forehead creases like she don't trust my hands. Maybe the way she stops moaning when I begin to help, like the only thing trying to push its way out of her body was stale breath.

"You don't gotta help," she says, her voice a steady monotone, only breaking with a slight drawl. I knew Shauna when we were more girls than women, shortly after she came out here from Memphis to live with her sister and her aunt, and I almost forgot the sweet home-sound that creeps out her lips.

"Don't got nothing else to do." I glance inside the crib, a small mound of cloth holding the infant. "How old?"

"She about to be two months."

I nod, not really sure what else there is to say about the baby's smallness. I think about the photo from the funeral home and wonder if Shauna ever thinks about how easy it is to stop breathing, to be something and then be gone, to love someone and disappear.

Shauna moves to pick up her child and walks to the couch, her sweatpants rolled down around her hips with her belly bulging. She sits, sinking in deeper until she's cocooned in the couch's soft red, like her baby is cocooned in her breasts. Shauna swiftly pulls her bra to the side and the child latches, sucking in deep like she was starving and is relearning how to be alive, how to feed. I think about looking away, but it doesn't seem like Shauna minds and the infant's lips are fascinating, the way they pulse. Shauna's eyes are still on her girl, sucking so hard I wonder how she isn't out of breath. Shauna's free nipple is dry and scabbed, but there is no evidence of this pain on her face, no worry of being cracked open.

"Kiara." I don't remember the last time she said my full name. I look at her, the lumps beneath her eyes heavy. "Don't get caught up in their shit."

She's still staring at her child, like the baby will choke if she looks away, so I'm not sure what she's talking about until the beat picks up and vibrates through my feet.

"You didn't have to have no baby."

Her head whips toward me. "You don't know nothing about what I've had to do. I'm just doing you a favor by telling you now not to give it all up for them." Her child stops suckling and begins to scream, and Shauna is on her feet, returning to her moaning, waiting for someone to ask, for one of the men to look at her, to wonder what's wrong.

Mama used to tell me that blood is everything, but I think we're all out here unlearning that sentiment, scraping our knees and asking strangers to patch us back up. I don't say goodbye to Shauna and she doesn't even turn around to watch me leave, to head back out to a sky that sunk into deep blue while my brother asked me to do the one thing I know I shouldn't, the one thing Shauna cared enough to warn me about: hollow myself out for another person who ain't gonna give a shit when I'm empty.