

I forgot to live. My eyes were fixated on the night sky, a beautiful array of veiled blues. I sat on the hill alone, the lush grass curling up over my body. Fireworks thundered, stirring up my feelings. Each rocket exploded as if they were conversing, a dis-harmonic reminder of my loneliness. I clamped my chest with my right hand, squeezing to feel pain or anything. I smiled. I laughed. My left hand began violently tearing at the grass along my side. I turned to face a patch of empty grass, *a perfect spot to sit* and my chest constricted. I thought, *Ireshia, what's the point of living?* Gradually my vision blurred as I continued to stare at the fireworks. All I could hear were the tears dropping, exploding onto the grass, each tear a note in a thundering tune. My laughing became choked, which only encouraged me to laugh harder. The fireworks stopped, revealing my laugh to me. I stopped, muted, no longer smiling and thought *Ireshia is dead. Move on.*

I was outside of my house, standing at the front door. The chilling breeze brushed against my fur coat and I wiped off my damp face. I smiled, my teeth concealed, and walked in to feel a cover of warmth, smelling the intoxicating scent of sweet chili. Without warning, I was blindsided by a hug at my waist, Ireshia's long french braided hair striped by my side. Ireshia looked up at me, grinning, revealing her missing baby teeth. Chipped, her two front teeth were glossed in SpongeBob toothpaste. This is a surprise visit, we went through our usual greetings and ceremony--the typical mundane process, yet it never felt dull with her. "Uh uh, you're not getting off easy boy," Ireshia said, puckering her lips and placing a hand on her hip. She raised her eyebrows past their intended limit, implying she wouldn't take my typical response of "nothing's wrong." I grimaced jokingly, "Why are you bullying me, little girl? Fine, my day was rough. School just kicked my ass."

"Ooooooh, I'm telling your mommy!" she responded, mockingly plopping herself on my mahogany-colored couch. My arm wrapped around her shoulders, and we giggled comfortably. Ireshia grabbed her boombox from the nearby bookshelf. She stood announcing, "I'll go first!"

Unimpressed, I responded, "Haha okay, I'm excited to beat you." Ireshia glared as she

began to tap her left foot, matching the song's upbeat thumps. Her head began to bob and then there was a moment of silence. The beat dropped and she exploded! Her body twisted then spun, spindly arms flailing as she glided across the wooden floor. She nearly slipped; however, she caught her balance and continued, both precise and graceful. She practically floated, each step a methodical slice of her masterpiece. Ireshia then started to sneak toe taps in between her steps. I caught a glance from Ireshia, her eyes squinted and she beamed with joy. *I wish I had this much energy in school.* I sniffed the air, *that chili is heavenly.* Ireshia thrust her shoulders up then down in a circular motion. She looked like a human car, driving as I smiled with my teeth bare. The song came to a close, I clapped, "Bravo bravo haha, you killed that, girl." She bowed, declaring, "Now, show me whatcha got boy!" Ireshia collapsed onto the couch as she wheezed and looked dumbfounded. Sweat traced her eyebrows, dripping into her eyes. She wiped, nudging me with her elbow. I stood, stretching out my arms and yawning, "I'm tired, we can finish another time." Ireshia exclaimed, "NO, let's do it now!"

"I'm hungry dude, aren't you? That chili smells so good." I responded, anxiously making my way towards the kitchen.

"No, I wanna—" Ireshia was cut off by my mom's food call to the dinner table. We ate dinner, Ireshia pouting and glaring throughout. Eventually, the doorbell rang. Then, Ireshia's mother banged on the door to the point that its frame pulsed. I opened the door. Ireshia's mother, my aunt, stood anxiously thumping her leg and snapping her fingers. Her curly weave was barely attached to her scalp. I winced at the smell of her breath as she forced herself past me. She demanded Ireshia be brought to her and began interrogating me. My aunt probed about my academics as she clapped frantically and praised me for sticking to the, apparently, "correct path." I started to get annoyed at her; her constant sniffing irritated me. There was a pasty blob of spit and an unfamiliar substance in the corner of her mouth. Initially, I thought it was a part of a cold, but her eyes spoke the truth. They were bloodshot. I offered a tissue; however, that was wasted energy. It was as if she didn't even see it. She looked past me. Ireshia arrived, and I attempted to hug her, but my aunt took her hand and began to pull her through the door. Their backs faced me, hiding my aunt's crack crazed lips. Ireshia looked at me, "You better come to Chicago and see me!"

My aunt yanked Ireshia out the door.

I smiled, waving cheerfully, "I'll see you very soon! Winter break, love you!" The door closed and life seemed dull.

Winter break had arrived early, the winds outside were frost ridden as snow piled upward. The school bell finished its chime, and the class fell silent, waiting for their instruction. I leaned against the back of my chair, closing my eyes briefly. Dr. Thompson began his lecture; I noticed he had a piece of spinach wedged in his front teeth or maybe it was lettuce. He wore his usual fresh dress shirt and tacky pants combo. One of his pants pockets was untucked, revealing its wine-stained spots. The child next to me spoke. His voice felt distant, yet directed at me. I stared at the ceiling, it was oddly clean. Nothing hung from it, except for the spider nest supported by silk and mold. My phone rang, buzzing in my pocket as I panicked to silence my phone. "Excuse yourself, Cordero," Dr. Thompson said to me, annoyed. I left the choir room as the class giggled. Unfazed in appearance only, I entered the hallway. My phone read "Mommy." I clicked accept, "Hey, what's up, ma?"

"D-man...I'm picking you up," she quickly responded, distressed.

Irritated, I said, "What why? I can't afford to-- "

"Damn it! Listen to me for once! Ireshia...Ireshia" my mother's voice cracked. She continued, "She's dead, I'm so sorry, baby. Grandad just called me." I placed a palm over my mouth and heard incoherent words through the phone. My hand curled, pressing against my nose as I sniffled and puffed air intensely. I began to tremble, my grip on the phone waned--it nearly slipped out of my hand. I cut my mother off, "How'd she die?" Impatiently, I yelled, "TELL ME. What happened?"

My mother took a breath, "Cordero, Ireshia never made it home. Your aunt fucking abandoned her. These past couple weeks Ireshia's been living on her own. She was in a car with a couple of kids who were playing with a gun...and it fired. The bullet killed her." A sharp pain struck my head as I clamped my chest, my shoulders feeling nauseatingly light. I hung up the phone and bolted to the bathroom. I slammed the stall door shut, locking it. I stared at the ceiling, and a tremor surged through my body. My shaking only made me angrier. I punched the door

once, twice, three times, paused, then a fourth. My hands were numb, blood trickled onto the floor. I sat down on the toilet and thought *I'm dreaming, this is just a nightmare. Wake up.* I slapped my face furiously multiple times, then stopped. My arms tightened, and my jaw locked open. I screamed, "Wake uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup!" Tears streamed onto my lips, stinging with a taste of salt. No one came. The hallway was silent. My eyes were attracted to the mold on the ceiling, and I laughed. The mold seemed on the verge of descending onto my face. I smiled weakly, my gaze falling to the ground, *what am I doing.* I licked my knuckles, cleaning the crevices in between my fingers. Then I wiped my tears, smearing my face with blood. I listened. Silence kept me company.

Three months had passed since that day. I'd never seen so many members of my family in one place, especially in a church. Everyone sat in their seats providing their complete attention to what laid in front of them, Ireshia's casket. The crowd was overwhelmed with feelings of hatred and sadness. First came the women whose violent wails pierced our hearts. Second came the children whose cries broke our spirits. Last came the men who forsook their pride. This wave of emotions engulfed me in hate. Despair washed over me as my eyes poured like rain. I hummed, an attempt to ease my mind but to no avail. The murderer, a 12-year old boy, sat four aisles ahead of me. I clenched my jaw and attempted to avert my eyes. A long trail of small pieces of kleenex led to Ireshia's casket. At last, my Aunt walked up to the casket and started howling, begging for forgiveness. Forgiveness that couldn't be discovered in this room. The walls were ashen and dull which seemed out of place in the presence of Ireshia. I couldn't force myself to see the body nor to cry. My stomach rumbled, something I learned to ignore. I stared at the pieces of tissues, the trail now muddled, and I stood. The casket pulled me closer, slowly, gradually, until my heart stopped. I peered into the casket, Ireshia wasn't smiling. She's dead. A covered hole resided below her right eyebrow. I wanted to feel her gaze, her touch, but it wasn't in this room. I was tempted to press my thumb on her eye to reveal its hollowness, or maybe mine. I looked back at the crowd and tears burnt the inner corners of my eyelids. The 12-year old murderer looked at me. My body trembled as I contemplated pressing my thumb into his skull. Instead, I dropped a ball of tissues next to her

casket. I left a piece of my humanity at the casket. My smile was stolen. The soles of my shoes were glittered with tissue paper.

Another three months passed; the leaves were verdant, unripe. I sat on the doorsteps of my school's main entrance. The wind catered to my heart, carrying a single leaf into my hands. Hands that resembled those of a beggar. The leaf's touch was jagged on the edges and smooth elsewhere. My hands curled and crumpled the leaf until it dispersed into pieces. Gone into the wind like the countless students and teachers alike who passed me. The school was 8 to 4, and it was 4:03. I felt invisible; a voice kissed my ears but their words were deafened. On my shoulder, I felt something. I looked up, and it's Dr. Thompson holding out a hand. He asked me, "Would you follow me?" He gestured to take a walk around the school. I followed and we talked. We spoke about Ireshia's death and how I lost my appetite. I felt like a husk as he listened intently, never allowing my gaze to wander into the clouds, the trees or cracks in the pavement. My breathing slowed, and the sun's heat caressed my skin. The wind carried our steps forward, providing a cool wall of protection. When Dr. Thompson wrapped his sweaty arm around my shoulders, I felt at home. I told him about my day in the bathroom stall and Ireshia's funeral. Our walking pace slowed dramatically, and he told me about his life. His experience with loss. "Keep moving forward. If you fall, fall forward. That's all you can ask for," Dr. Thompson hugged me until I couldn't breathe, yet I felt alive. I heard his sniffing, "I'm here for you boy. You're precious." He then explained why he made me jump through hoops during classes. He believed in me. We continued walking, and I told him about Ireshia's dancing. My eyes lit up, my chest proud. Dr. Thompson grinned, laughing and chiming in about the ridiculousness of her dancing. I realized how much I missed talking, to him, to people. I had so much energy my hands were cycling between soft clapping and rubbing. We laughed, then there was a moment of silence. Dr. Thompson looked anxious as he pondered something. He scratched his chin then asked, "Would you join my show choir team? You'd really help us do something special." I was taken aback, and all I could manage was a thumbs up. I began laughing forcefully, an unnatural laugh marking change. Dr. Thompson just smiled in response. We'd arrived at the bike rack and said goodbye. I biked home alone but grounded. My

eyes wandered, searching for something. I looked at the trees, the clouds and the cracks in the pavement. No answers were found, yet my life had finally hit unpause.

After a year of countless hours working on my craft, I joined a family, *4th Avenue Jazz Ensemble*. The bruises that stretched from my thighs to my ankles, the sacrifices to my schoolwork, the vulnerability, the failures, tears, blood, doubt, and pain were all worth it. Now, I was at my first performance. My pain and struggle were veiled by a smile. A natural smile that had the support of all my fellow performers on stage. We stood anxiously as we all held hands behind an unveiled curtain, waiting in anticipation. My shoulders bore an excessive weight, buckling my knees and sowing the seeds of doubt, as I remembered the unmatched spirit of Ireshia's dancing. My chest felt warm as I remembered her laugh, her eyes, and how her beautiful braided hair twirled. The curtains ascended, revealing the stage. In harmony, we walked to our designated spots. I arrived at the front row faced with uncertainty and fear. My shaking stopped, I breathed. There was a moment of silence. I thought, *Ireshia do you see me?* I stared into the crowd, a deep abyss. The countless eyes receded into the darkness; however, dim lights shined over us. The band began playing, and our bodies moved, synchronized with the song's rigid three counts. I pounded my chest, followed by my arms reaching out, beckoning the beat. My arms pulled into my armpits and I froze. My ears deafened out the world, and everything seemed to have slowed down. My eyes wandered, I saw all the faces in the crowd. There was a pair of kids, a boy, and a girl. The girl had an arm around the boy, leaning her head against his. In the pocket of her flannel, a ball of tissues peered out and I smiled, exposing my teeth. I looked below the stage and saw Dr. Thompson. He held a thumbs up, smiling, his eyes locked with mine. Sweat traced my eyebrows, dripping into my eyes, but it didn't matter. The music fell silent and this unnerving silence broke the rigidity of my dancing. The beat dropped and my body exploded. A graceful explosion that embodied passion and love. The tremor of hate surged out. My body twirled and dashed across the stage as joy poured from every outlet in my body. My body continued to give what was owed and the burdens that submerged me in sheets of ice melted. I thought *Ireshia lives*.

The living room smelled of fresh chili. Its sweetness made me cringe as I leaned back against the stiff couch. I plopped my feet onto the table, exposing my overgrown toenails that were filled with dirt. On my heels, the skin was hard, it peeled like slices of cheese and blisters were littered between my toes. I pulled an ashen rag from my pocket and began scrubbing. I dipped it into the bucket of warm water at my feet. My feet throbbed and bled as I scraped away the dead skin. I expected to feel pain but it didn't greet me. Then my mind traveled to thoughts about Ireshia. I thought, *I bet her feet hurt*. Before she died, Ireshia must've traveled the streets alone, listening to dogs on chains barking and strangers yelling. Each street looked identical and the wind slapped her face as she walked with no destination in mind but home. *Where is home?* Periodically, she thought, *Mama or D-man gotta be near*. Each car that passed gave her false hope. I'm sure she slipped on ice once or twice and waited for someone to lift her. No one did. Or maybe she came across a garbage can and decided to eat a moldy piece of bread that had peanut butter on the crust. Her smile had to fade at some point. In reality, I know that she would get desperate enough to hang out with a couple of strangers, some kids who grew up too fast. They sat in a car, protected and safe until a 12-year old boy revealed a pistol. The kids laughed and joked about gang violence, imitating the thugs on their streets. There sat Ireshia in the back, silently crying, but no one listened. The pistol was fired and the bullet entered her skull only 25 miles away from me. My imagination died. I finished cleaning my feet, a puddle of blood and water flowed across the table. The blood almost reached the edge, trickling onto the carpet. I didn't care if it did. I placed my feet in a bucket of warm water. I looked at the wall. Its paint was a faded purple except for one spot concealed. There was a picture of Ireshia mounted on the wall, covering the hollow spot where I'd once punched the wall and broken through the drywall. I removed the picture, placing it on the ground. Then I dumped my bloodied bucket of water into the hole. I mounted the picture back up. The picture stared. In the picture, Ireshia smiled, a smile that was undeniable. I squinted my eyes, smiling at the photo and thought, *her smile moved mountains*.