SAMUEL FRENCH SAMPLE PERUSAL

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SF PERUSALS

brownsville song (b-side for tray)

Kimber Lee

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
Founded 1830

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Gordon Edelstein, Artistic Director; Joshua Borenstein, Managing Director

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BROWNSVILLE SONG (B-SIDE FOR TRAY) was first produced by the Actors Theatre of Louisville as part of the Humana Festival in Louisville, Kentucky on March 14, 2014. The performance was directed by Meredith McDonough, with sets by Dane Laffrey, costumes by Connie Furr Soloman, lights by Ben Stanton, sound by Jake Rodriguez, , dramaturgy by Jacqueline E. Lawton, and movement direction by Hattie Mae Williams. The Production Stage Manager was Stephen Horton. The cast was as follows:

LENA . . . . . Cherene Snow
TRAY . . . . . John Clarence Stewart
DEVINE . . . . . Sally Diallo
MERRELL . . . . . Jackie Chung
JUNIOR . . . . . Joshua Boon

BROWNSVILLE SONG (B-SIDE FOR TRAY) received its New York premiere at Lincoln Center Theatre in New York City on October 4, 2014. The performance was directed by Patricia McGregor with sets by Andromache Chalfant, costumes by Dede Ayite, lights by Jiyoun Chang, sound by Asa Wember, and choreography by Paloma McGregor. The Production Stage Manager was Stacy Waring. The cast was as follows:

LENA . . . . . Lizan Mitchell
TRAY . . . . . Sheldon Best
DEVINE . . . . . Taliyah Whitaker
MERRELL . . . . . Sun Mee Chomet
JUNIOR . . . . . Chris Myers

CHARACTERS

LENA – Black. Late 50s – early 60s.

TRAY – Black. 18 years old.

DEVINE – Black and Korean American. 9 years old.

MERRELL – Korean American. 36 years old.

JUNIOR – Black. 18 years old.

BROOKLYN COLLEGE STUDENT – Black. Early-20s. Played by JUNIOR actor

SETTING

late spring, mid-summer, and late summer of the same year.

various locations in and around the Brownsville and East Flatbush neighborhoods in Brooklyn, NY.

note: the fluidity of time in the play should be embodied in the fluidity of the staging; in whatever way the transitions are accomplished, they will be most effective for the story if they are actor-driven and in rhythm.

A FEW ITEMS

things in parentheses are not meant to be spoken, just thought

line breaks usually mean a new thought, an interrupted thought, or a turn in the same thought but do not always require a pause

'pause' means a brief silence

'silence' means a slightly longer pause

pauses or silences in this play are not negative space, they are held moments where the internal activity of the character arcs into the external world – they hold the space of a thought just as a rest in a musical score holds the space of a note

A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

The aliveness of the play lives in the rhythm and flow of the language, which includes the syncopation of the pauses and silences, and the physical movement indicated in the stage directions. Very often, a stage direction such as "He nods" is holding an important beat in the rhythm of the scene, so it is crucial to not skip over them. Those spaces should be just as full and driving forward with the need of the characters as the words, and if the pauses and stage directions are honored, they will do good work for you.

Because the story pivots around a deep loss, there may be a tendency to sink into that emotion, but this should be resisted. The scenes, even the ones after Tray's death, must drive forward, as we all must do in life even in the midst of heartbreak. Especially for Merrell, a healthy measure of trust that the depth of feeling is present, and simply saying the words to get the job done will be most effective. Merrell presents a dual challenge: to stay present and purposeful and strong, without sinking into regret and pain or playing her angry or defensive – dry humor is useful tool.

*

I wish to express my deep gratitude to the community of Brownsville in Brooklyn, in particular the wonderful folks at the Brownsville Recreation Center, for welcoming me and the LCT3 cast and creative team on our visits and sharing personal experiences with us so generously.

Although the reality of loss is currently an unfortunately frequent part of life in the neighborhood, it is important to know and remember that Brownsville is a vibrant, hopeful community filled with people fighting for change.

It is my hope that any production of this play would express the light, humor and resilient humanity of the Brownsville community, and not add weight to their struggle by presenting the neighborhood as only a dark, dangerous place where violent things happen – they are sadly accustomed to being stereotyped in this way in the media. But as we have seen in recent years, our collective failure to stem the tide of gun violence has spread beyond the borders of any particular neighborhood, and so in many ways the challenges and pain of the Brownsville community belong to all of us, no matter our zip code, and with every loss, we are all diminished.

This play is dedicated to the people of Brownsville, and their tremendous heart, courage, humor, and relentless hope in the face of sometimes overwhelming circumstances.

"The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out."

– James Baldwin, 1964, "Nothing Personal"

[LENA]

(Twilight darkness.)

(Periodically, headlights slide onto the walls, stretch sideways, and swoop away.)

(Dim lamplight around **LENA***, sitting in a chair, and a dim rectangle of light through a doorway behind her.)*

(She leans slightly forward, chin out, listening to see if she really heard what she just heard.)

(Which she did.)

(She leans back.)

(Her lips curl slightly – not a smile, but like one.)

LENA. No

(She shakes her head slowly.)

(As she speaks, her rage mounts, but she keeps it in check with deliberate and measured speech.)

Do not begin with me
Do not start your telling with me
Trust me
It ain't the way you want this story to begin
Not here
Not with me
Nah
Y'all ain't want my
I got words crowdin up from my belly
through my neck
shovin my mouth into the same shape
formin the same out loud thought over and over
HE WAS NOT
HE WAS NOT
HE WAS NOT
I just

I been scooped out like a jack o lantern
Carved up and
emptied of every thought but one
He was not

(Beat.)

(She breathes.)

Nah now
Listen
This ain't what you wanna put in fronta people right from the jump
they ain't tryna hear all this shit
all this all this
all THIS comin at em
It's too much it's it's
ain't *comfortable* and what they gon do
What should they do
Stop eatin dinner turn off they TV call somebody
why
what
who the fuck they gon call and for what
what is there they gon do about this shit
They don't know me
They don't know Tray
It's too much
You ain't say these kinda things at the beginning
I'm not the beginning
I'm the end

(Her throat closes around her words.)

(She presses her lips together again.)

(She breathes.)

*(***DEVINE** *enters, a small skinny silhouette in the doorway behind* **LENA**.*)*

*(***DEVINE** *clutches a small, worn NY Jets football-shaped pillow, and we may not be able to see her clearly, but her focus is fixed on* **LENA** *like a laser sight.)*

LENA. I am so
You know I got a like a

On my back a
thing
There's some
thing
Got a
a uh weight to it
Dig into my ribcage every breath I take every hour of the day
Drippin scratchin on my skin with its red saliva
Writin his name over and over
Those letters just burnin through to my bones
burning me with *why*
and *he knew better*
and *didn't I say to him*

(She presses her lips together, glares.)

And what is this
Huh
What is this to you
Same Old Story huh
A few damn lines in the paper
A split second a some poor old woman
Wringin her hands and cryin on your evening news
And then
Nothing
and the truth
Aftermath is damn boring and grief is a tedious muthafucker
And you gon go on to the next one or whatever you gon do
walk-a-thon
cookie push
pour ice water on your damn head
Same Old Story so you gon feel bad and move on
Cuz he just another
Ain't he
To you
he was not
Whatever rest my words been havin before
Whatever home they made of this world

They wanderin the wilderness now
Repeatin that hollowed out refrain
why why why
He ain't been in a gang
He ain't run with no crew
He ain't beef with nobody
He was not
And what he is

(Pause.)

(A jagged breath.)

What he was

(The rage begins to breach her control – she struggles, gets it in check.)

(Her telling about **TRAY** *starts quietly, her love and joy in him insistently showing through, but the heartbreak overtakes her by the end.)*

He was goin to college this fall
He was a Golden Gloves Champion
He was savin up for a car
My cousin Ronda's old Mazda Protege
He was workin nights and weekends and he just got his one year raise
He was goin to the dentist next week and get his first filling
Eighteen years old and never hadda cavity
You ever met a boy that age got that kinda dental hygiene No you ain't
He was a back talker
He was a terrible liar and semi-reliable bout everything but his baby sister and boxing
He was a mule when he dug in
I tried to break him a drinkin out the milk carton for all eighteen of his years
and for eighteen years that boy snuck round me and drank all my damn milk
and for eighteen years
He was not the same old story
he was mine
he was mine
he was mine

(Rage and grief choke her.)

(She clamps her mouth shut, glaring through tears but not crying.)

(She breathes.)

*(**DEVINE** slides silently into a sitting position, huddled against the doorframe, still holding tight to the pillow.)*

LENA. So don't begin your telling with me
It don't begin here where I sit shook stupid
Start with him please
Start with Tray

(Beat.)

*(**LENA**'s jagged breathing.)*

(Sound of cars whooshing by, headlights sweep the wall to:)

(Blackout.)

(Sounds of a school hallway, bells ringing, noise of kids going to class.)

[DEVINE]

(Fourth grade classroom.)

(Sounds of kids rustling.)

*(***DEVINE** *enters, carrying a paper.)*

TEACHER. *(voiceover)* Okay Devine

It's your turn to read honey

(She reads softly, overwhelmed with nervousness.)

DEVINE. My Friday Feature Family Member Be My Brother Tray

by Devine

My brother Tray like many sports

Some sports he like be football and boxing and such

This be his New York Jets souvner football

*(***DEVINE** *looks up and out, listening to the teacher.)*

(She gives a little nod, says it again.)

This *is* be his New York Jets soovenner football

(She looks for the football, can't find it.)

(Sounds of restless kids, maybe one or two kids giggling at her.)

*(***DEVINE** *panics a little, freezes up.)*

TEACHER. *(voiceover, receding, echoing)* Devine

Are you okay honey

*(***TRAY** *appears, upstage in shadow.)*

(He pops a deuce and poses.)

*(***DEVINE** *turns and sees him, relief and joy flood her little body.)*

DEVINE. Tray

(Light shift.)

(Sharp, angular, blue-white light shafts in from the sides, sculpting the stage into a dream space:)

(This is **DEVINE***'s World.)*

(It doesn't exist entirely inside her head, it corresponds in sound and shape and boundaries to the "real world," but light and weight and time run on a different, parallel track here.)

(Some kinda Brother Sister Dance:)

*(***TRAY** *moves rapidly, in a fluid, arcing line around* **DEVINE***, surrounding her, sketching in the lines of her world.)*

(He takes out the NY Jets football pillow.)

*(***DEVINE** *smiles.)*

(He teaches her the proper way to throw a football.)

(They play catch.)

(He makes her hold it for him to kick.)

(She shies away when he runs toward her, drops the football.)

(They argue.)

(She tries to hold it again, but cringes away at the last second.)

(He turns his back, walks away.)

(She goes absolutely still, the way you would if a wild animal jumped in your path.)

(A loaded beat.)

(He places a gentle hand on her shoulder.)

(Something passes between them, silently.)

(They breathe together.)

(He moves back and they resume their game of catch.)

(He moves back.)

(He moves back.)

(He is swallowed by the shadows.)

(She throws the ball.)

(It falls to the ground where **TRAY** *was standing.)*

(She walks over and picks it up, looking for **TRAY***, confused.)*

(Lights shift.)

*(***LENA** *crosses left to right downstage,* **DEVINE** *watches her, clutching the football.)*

(Like a movie screen wipe, **LENA** *brings the light/scene shift with her to:)*

[SUTTER & RALPH AVES]

*(***LENA***'s kitchen.)*

*(***TRAY** *sits at a table in a chair that seems too small for him.)*

(A beat-up outdated laptop is open on the table, but **TRAY** *is focused on his cellphone.)*

(In the other room, **LENA** *works out to a reggaeton)*

(Zumba DVD playing at low volume.)

LENA. Tray

TRAY. *(still looking at phone)* Yo

LENA. I ain't hearin no damn typin out there

TRAY. I'm thinkin

LENA. How bout you put your think on the damn computer keys

TRAY. Aight

LENA. *Tray*

TRAY. Aight yo calm down

LENA. Boy I know you did not just tell me to *calm down*

TRAY. Sorry sorry

Ima get it done

LENA. You better

ZUMBA DVD VOICE.

"You're warmed up now

And Talisha is ready to blast your quads

Let's

Get

BUMPIN"

*(***TRAY** *clicks on the laptop, cell still in the other hand.)*

(He scrolls through a document, lips moving slightly as he reads silently.)

(He types with two fingers.)

(He types, deletes, types, deletes.)

TRAY. *(mutters)* Awww man

fuckin fuck muthafuckin

fuuuuuuuuuuuck

(He looks at his cell.)

(He gets up and shadowboxes for a few seconds.)

(He looks at the screen, sighs heavily.)

(He types again.)

(He reads it, he groans in frustration and runs a hand over his face.)

(He looks up at the clock.)

(His cell beeps, he looks at it.)

Shit

(He texts rapidly.)

(The Zumba DVD shuts off abruptly.)

*(***LENA** *enters, wearing a fuschia and orange track suit, wiping her face with a towel.)*

*(***TRAY** *hurriedly flips his phone shut and pockets it.)*
*(***LENA** *glances at him, gets herself a glass of water.)*

*(***TRAY** *closes the laptop and starts to exit.)*

TRAY. *(cont.)* Welp
Ima get on
LENA. Not so fast my boy
Let's see it
TRAY. I ain't done yet
LENA. Then where you goin
TRAY. I got boxing
LENA. Not til you finish that shit you ain't
TRAY. Come on Grams
I do it when I get home
For real
I only got the last part left to do and I gotta
I gotta think on how to end it right
LENA. Sit your ass down
TRAY. Man
LENA. Read me what you got
TRAY. Aw shit Grams come on
LENA. Now just who you think you talkin to
Watch your damn mouth
TRAY. Psshhh
LENA. Go ahead now

TRAY. FINE THEN

*(***TRAY** *goes to the laptop, brings up the document.)*

(He glances at **LENA**.*)*

Now
Keep in mind
This a rough draft yo
LENA. Uh huh
TRAY. I ain't done yet
LENA. I heard
TRAY. So you gotta
you know
Withhold and shit
LENA. withhold
TRAY. Judgment
LENA. Psshh
TRAY. And that includes blowin ya nose air at me like you do
LENA. Blowin what now

*(***TRAY** *makes a disdainful, airy nose snort at her.)*

(She throws her towel at his head.)

Oh go on
TRAY. Now later on
when I got time I
LENA. Boy what you talkin bout
"When you got time"
It's time right now
TRAY. No I gotta go
I told you
LENA. Oh you *told me*
TRAY. I mean
I just now explained to you that I gotta be at boxing
Remember
We got the Gloves coming up right
LENA. Gloves

TRAY. Yeah
Golden Gloves
Boxing tournament
Grams come on
You signed the dang release forms for me two months ago

*(***LENA** *struggles to remember, he watches her closely.)*

Alla coach's schedules and permission slips
You ain't remember alla that
We sat right here and

*(***LENA** *waves her hand at him.)*

LENA. Aright aright aright
TRAY. *(are you okay)* You remember
LENA. *(shutup)* Look here
Ima tell you again and believe me when I say
You miss another one a those scholarship deadlines
Ima mess you up good boy
TRAY. I know I know
Dang
Grams rollin up all thug life right here in the kitchen
LENA. Oh lord child
Sometimes you ain't make no kinda sense
TRAY. Yo all I'm sayin is
Hugs Not Thugs
LENA. Boy
TRAY. Just Say No Grams
LENA. Back up now
TRAY. Only You Can Stop The Cycle Of Violence
LENA. I'll cycle you

(She playfully bats him on the head, he laughs.)

Quit your stallin

*(***TRAY** *sighs.)*

TRAY. Okay
LENA. Okay

*(***TRAY** *clears his throat.)*

(He reads.)

TRAY. My name is Tramaine Berry Thompson

(She blows her nose air at him.)

(He looks at her.)

LENA. *(covering her blunder)* Well now
That's a good start Tray
And a true fact

*(***TRAY***'s cell rings.)*

Boy don't you (dare)

*(***TRAY** *flips his phone open.)*

*(***LENA** *glares at him.)*

TRAY. *(into the phone)* Yo
Yeah I'm here I
Nah nah
Hold up

(He glances at **LENA***, who makes a point of not giving him any privacy.)*

(He turns away, lowers voice.)

*(***LENA** *watches him like a hawk.)*

I told you
Ima be there
No I

TRAY. *(into the phone)* Yeah
Yeah
Aight then

(He flips his phone shut.)

*(***LENA** *stares at him, he won't meet her eye.)*

LENA. (Tell me that wasn't who I think it was)
Tray

(Silence.)

*(***LENA** *shakes her head.)*

Uh Uh
Mm Mm
Do NOT

TRAY. Okayokayokay
Come on it ain't what you thinkin
I just got a uh

a
I made a promise

LENA. To who

(Beat.)

To WHO

(Silence.)

*(***LENA** *presses her lips together, stands, and begins making dinner loudly.)*

TRAY. I can't uh
Grams come on

LENA. We ain't havin this again my boy
Not again
And you know I mean what I say

TRAY. (I know your worries and Ima be fine, I promise)

I know
I do
I know

(Silence.)

Grams
It ain't what you thinkin
I swear it ain't
Grams
Hey come on Grams

(She looks up at him fiercely.)

(She reaches out suddenly, he slips to the side [boxing reflexes], she waits for him to come back up [grandma reflexes], grabs his face, holds it firmly, looking into his eyes.)

LENA. *Not you*
Okay

TRAY. Okay

(She hugs him, sudden and tight.)

(She shoves him toward the door.)

LENA. Now get outta my kitchen
I ain't tryna make dinner with your overgrowed hulk ass in the way

(He kisses the top of her head, goes into the front room, gathers his boxing gear quickly.)

LENA. Don't forget
Devine gon be down the hall at Miss Coles' classroom
cuz today creative dance day
aright Tray

Tray

TRAY. I got it
I'm gone

(He grins and exits.)

(As the lights shift, street sounds from the block fade up: Cars whooshing by, distant subway rattle and hum, car horns, baby crying, shouting and laughing, cell phones ring, car alarms, slap of plastic sandals as kids run past, shop doors open and close, boom of subwoofers in passing cars, and at least three different languages can be heard.)

*(***LENA** *goes to the window and watches him walk down Ralph Avenue toward the subway.)*

(We hear **TRAY** *walking down the block, passing a group of dudes on the corner, hear* **JUNIOR** *calling out to him.)*

*(***TRAY** *enters with* **JUNIOR**.*)*

(They stop and talk, and though we can't hear them, there's an exchange that ends with **TRAY** *shaking his head.)*

(Laughing, good-natured shoving back and forth between **JUNIOR** *and* **TRAY**.*)*

*(***TRAY** *says his goodbyes, smiles and continues down the block.)*

*(***JUNIOR** *calls after him.)*

JUNIOR. JUST FACTS T
REAL TALK
YOU GOTTA GET PAID

*(***TRAY** *keeps walking, flashes a deuce behind him without turning or breaking pace.)*

(Subway sounds get closer, overtake and drown out the other sounds as the train passes in a rush of clacking air and squealing brakes that take the lights with it to:)

(Blackout.)

[DEVINE]

(In the darkness, a solitary oboe plays the first phrases of "Flight of the Swans" from Swan Lake.*)*

*(***DEVINE***'s World – lights up on a fourth grade classroom.)*

TEACHER. *(voiceover)* All right swans
Get in your starting places
Devine
The tree stands over there

*(***DEVINE** *enters, crosses a few feet, and stands holding her arms out at angles – she's a tree by the lake of swan tears.)*

(Shadows flap past behind her – her classmates, the swans.)

(They dance in the lake of tears.)

*(***DEVINE** *watches the teacher carefully, bobbing her head slightly with the beat, then on cue, moves her arms in a small, vaguely tree-like way in time with the music.)*

(At first, she is nervous and stiff, eyes latched onto the teacher.)

(The shadows of her swan classmates flap around her.)

(After a few repetitions, she starts to move more freely with the music.)

*(***DEVINE** *sees the teacher gesture for her to move less so she pulls back, but the music gets into her and slowly, her body pulls her into a dance.)*

(Lights up on **TRAY***, in the boxing gym.)*

(He jumps rope, light feet.)

(The beat of the rope on the ground is in perfect time with the music.)

(A hip-hop beat surfaces through the music, threading through the Tchaikovsky, a duet of rhythms flowing back and forth.)

*(***TRAY***'s feet dance with the rope as he jumps.)*

*(***DEVINE** *dances her tree dance, throwing a little more flavor on it.)*

(Music builds.)

*(***DEVINE***'s dance expands, becomes more urgent.)*

(Thunder over the lake of swan tears.)

(She dances away from the classroom, out of the school building.)

(Rain of swan tears starts to fall.)

*(***TRAY** *stops roping, breathing hard.)*

(He goes to his gym bag, takes out his cell phone and checks it.)

(Lights down on **TRAY***.)*

*(***DEVINE** *keeps dancing, her feet splashing through puddles.)*

(The music builds to a BOOM – subwoofers vibrate in a passing car.)

(At the boom, the shadows of her classmates flap loudly up and away, like a disturbed flock of pigeons, leaving **DEVINE** *alone and confused on the school playground.)*

(Rain falls.)

*(***DEVINE** *notices she is soaked, she shivers.)*

(She walks to a bench and sits.)

(She waits.)

(It grows later, sky turns from grey to navy blue.)

(Rain falls.)

(Another car passes, subwoofers booming.)

(Neon signs from the neighborhood flicker on.)

(Sounds flare up suddenly, filling the air: arguing voices approach, horn honks, the hiss of car tires on wet pavement.)

(The arguing voices get closer, louder.)

*(***DEVINE** *gets under the bench.)*

(The voices pass.)

(A car swooshes past and lights shift from playground to:)

[FLATBUSH GARDENS BOXING GYM]

(A small neighborhood boxing gym.)

(A floor ring, heavy bags, speed bags, slip ball, gym clock.)

(It's early in the afternoon, the gym is quiet.)

*(***TRAY** *sits on a folding chair, clicking on his cell phone, gym bag at his feet.)*

*(***MERRELL** *enters, sees him, hesitates, then crosses to him.)*

MERRELL. Tray

*(***TRAY** *looks up.)*

(Loaded beat, they take each other in slowly.)

Been a long time
You look
God you got so ah
tall

(Silence.)

How's the boxing going
Does the
TRAY. You late
MERRELL. I know
I
TRAY. Coach told me you was straight with all your shit
Wasn't gon be none a this or that
We set a time
Boom
You gon be there
MERRELL. I just
Had a
Thing
with my Metro card I
TRAY. Yeah
Always somethin ain't it

(She looks at him.)

(He raises his eyebrows and looks away.)

MERRELL. Yeah

(Pause.)

MERRELL. I am really
so grateful to Ray for
and to you
for letting me come in here and I
If you don't wanna do this with me
I get it

(Slight pause.)

TRAY. Still here ain't I

MERRELL. Okay
Real sorry about being late
It won't happen again

*(***TRAY** *nods, but doesn't look at her.)*

(Pause.)

*(***MERRELL** *takes a deep breath.)*

Tray
Before we um
I wanted to tell you

TRAY. Nah
I ain't need to hear all that

MERRELL. But I do want to
um
I owe you an apol
I owe you so much and

TRAY. Ayo
what I say
I ain't tryna go into alla that
That's your trip lady

MERRELL. I know but I

TRAY. Are you gon help me

MERRELL. Just
I'm really

TRAY. You supposed to be helpin me
So we gon put in work or what
Cuz if not I got me some places to be yo

MERRELL. Okay
yes
okay
TRAY. And I don't know what you thinkin bout what we doin here but
Don't get it twisted
You gon slide back up in here this way
We keepin it all business
You my Flatbush Gardens volunteer tutor
That's it
Anything else you got in mind
You gon have to go through Grams and you know it
MERRELL. I do
I know
I know

(Pause.)

I wasn't trying to to

(Pause.)

Yes
Yes I was trying
I didn't mean
Not anything bad I just
It seemed like a
The best way
TRAY. Nah I get it
You scared a Grams when she fired up
You and everybody else on the eastern seaboard but look yo
I can't give you none on this
You know I can't
and you know why

(Pause.)

*(***MERRELL** *takes a couple of deep breaths, nodding.)*
MERRELL. Yeah
Sorry

*(***TRAY** *shrugs.)*

No really
I am
I was wrong

(Pause.)

*(***MERRELL** *tries to keep herself from going to pieces.)*

*(***TRAY** *watches her through narrowed eyes.)*

TRAY. Yo
Ain't the only one ever been that

(Pause.)

D is fine
Doin good

*(***MERRELL***'s head snaps up, she looks at him gratefully, reaches a hand toward his arm.)*
(He does not return the warm look, leans away from her hand.)

(without malice, business-like) She ain't none a your concern neither
And Ima take your help cuz coach told me
But you best adjust your
If you gotta idea bout some kinda vibe be ready to jump off
You think you still get to be Devine's mama or
Some 'good ol' days when we was a family' shit gon come back and
fill up space between Then and Now
Nah
That be burned up dead space
Ain't nothing breathin there and
Real talk
She ain't thought a you any more than I thought about my mama after she left
So
We gon be like strangers Merrell
or even
Less than strangers cuz I ain't know what a stranger do
But you
I seen in action

(Pause.)

So if we understandin the situation here
We can get on with it
If not
I go ask coach to get me another tutor

(Pause.)

(She nods.)

Aight then

(Silence.)

*(***MERRELL** *gets a folder out of her bag.)*

(She sits next to **TRAY***, opens the folder and takes out a printed copy of his rough draft essay, a single page.)*

MERRELL. Okay
Let's take a look
I printed out what you sent me and

TRAY. Whoa whoa whoa
Hold up
I thought you was just gonna do it

MERRELL. You
what

TRAY. Yeah I mean
You said on the phone
you was like

MERRELL. I said I was gonna help you

TRAY. Yeah but

MERRELL. What do you think that means

TRAY. I dunno
I tell you some shit and
You gon put the
you know
Lay down the actual words

MERRELL. Uh yeah
No

TRAY. Come on
Still gon be my words right

MERRELL. Tray

TRAY. So what it gon matter bout
exactly who did the exact
putting of the words

MERRELL. Because it does

TRAY. Psshh

MERRELL. The scholarship committee

They wanna hear you
Your voice
TRAY. my what
MERRELL. They wanna know who you are
TRAY. What
No
School counselor said
Just talk about goals and accomplishments and shit
Make it sound
you know
Slick
MERRELL. Phony
TRAY. Yeah
MERRELL. No
TRAY. Man
MERRELL. That's not
TRAY. what
MERRELL. Look
They go through stacks of these essays
They don't wanna read a resume
you know what I mean
TRAY. psssh
MERRELL. They wanna know what your dreams are
You want this to sound like you're just talking to them
About your life and your
TRAY. That shit ain't none a they business
MERRELL. If you want their money it is

(Silence.)

Look this doesn't have to be a
There's a way to use this essay to show them
what sets you apart from other people
Why you need this scholarship to achieve your um
you know
You gotta
TRAY. beg
MERRELL. What

TRAY. Get down on my knees like a good boy
Make sure they feelin good bout
helpin a poor negro chile from the ghetto
MERRELL. Well
not
I mean not exactly
but
It's not going to hurt for them to understand where you come from
The challenges that you've
TRAY. I ain't feelin that yo
MERRELL. I don't mean uh
I just think you can
TRAY. *(matter of fact)* Nah I know what you sayin
And I ain't tryna play up some bullshit
talkin bout
'oh Ima poor black boy from the violent ghetto'
That ain't my life
Ain't gon be my life you understand
MERRELL. Good and
This is a chance to tell them that

(Slight pause.)

TRAY. Aight then

*(***TRAY** *looks at his cell phone.)*

MERRELL. So
How do you think you might start
TRAY. *(distracted, looking at his phone)* Start
MERRELL. What's the first thing you'd like them to know

(Pause.)

*(***TRAY** *shrugs, looks at his cell.)*

Tray

(Pause.)

(She hands him the copy of his essay.)

I am not going to write this for you
TRAY. man
whatever

(Silence.)

*(**TRAY** looks down at the paper.)*

*(**MERRELL** rubs her face, sighs.)*

MERRELL. Okay just
Forget all that for a sec

(She takes a deep breath, resets.)

So um
How's boxing
You're getting ready for the Gloves coming up right

TRAY. Yeah

MERRELL. And Ray says you did real well in Metros last fall
even though you lost in the finals

(Pause.)

TRAY. I guess

(Pause.)

MERRELL. So
What happened
Ray said you had some trouble in the first round

(Pause.)

TRAY. I got injured

MERRELL. oh shit

TRAY. Yeah uh
you know it was
that summer I was ten and took us to Zadie Miller's birthday party at Underhill
remember I tweaked out my right knee playin basketball
Well in my first fight
Dude was real short and thick
just walkin straight into me every time and
mostly I caught him with short hooks and straight rights when he came in
but one time
we got in a clinch and
muhfucka stepped on my foot and just
leaned alla his weight onto me
and pop
I felt that old knee go
and the rest a the bout
Every time I stepped left it was like a knife

MERRELL. Ray said he could see the pain on your face in the corner

Then at the bell
You walked right back out there like it was nothing
TRAY. Yeah
I guess
MERRELL. How'd you keep yourself goin
TRAY. I dunno
MERRELL. Tray
Come on
TRAY. Nah serious
I ain't even know
I just
I ain't wanna quit
Ain't wanna go out like that
MERRELL. I remember that about you

(Slight pause.)

First time I came home with your pop
First time I met you
You were just a little kid but you had this uh
Weird inner strength
TRAY. what you talkin bout
weird
MERRELL. Well yeah
For a kid that age to have that kind of
If you fell and hurt yourself you didn't cry and wail
And once you started something
A puzzle A coloring book A Lego house
you never gave up on it
And you didn't throw tantrums you
You did this thing where you uh
You'd go find a place
Like behind that big green chair we had
and you'd just sit
Silent
until you got over it
You were a little man

(Silence.)

*(**MERRELL** watches him, he looks away.)*

TRAY. nah

(Pause.)

TRAY. I mean I guess I
Yo I just put it some place else
I don't dwell on it cuz
you know
If they a job to get done
I gotta get it done yo
Ain't no use be always thinkin on pain cuz
Truth
It ain't gon go away
and it ain't gon stop me

(Silence.)

*(**MERRELL** watches him, pained and proud.)*

MERRELL. I think that's a good thing to put in your essay

TRAY. What
boxing

MERRELL. Not just boxing
About how you keep going
I mean
For someone your age
There's a lot of really
difficult things you've had to deal with

(Pause.)

TRAY. Nah
I told you
I ain't gon cry bout things can't be changed
Ain't gon let that shit fade me neither
My life is good
I got Grams and D

MERRELL. I'm not saying complain
It's more about
Dealing with obstacles

(Pause.)

*(**TRAY** checks his cell phone, sees the time.)*

TRAY. oh shit
I gotta get on

(He zips up his gym bag.)

MERRELL. But

TRAY. I call you later

MERRELL. Okay but just
Here's your homework okay

TRAY. What
Nah man
I ain't tryna have no homework on this shit

MERRELL. Hey
You want this thing or not

TRAY. psshh

MERRELL. Look just
Don't think about it like you're doin it for them
You understand
Do it for you
What do you want people to know about you
Not words someone put in your mouth
Me or
your school counselor or Lena
But what you want to say
Not for them or for anyone else
For you
Tell them who you are

TRAY. yeah yeah okay

(He turns to go.)

*(***MERRELL** *puts a hand on his arm.)*

MERRELL. I know I fucked everything up
I know I can never make it right
but
I wish
ah
No
All I want to say ah
I'm so proud to have known you Tray

(They lock eyes for a beat.)

*(***TRAY** *nods at her and exits.)*

*(***MERRELL** *sits again.)*

(She takes a deep breath, and on her big exhale:)

(Lights shift to school playground.)

[DEVINE]

*(***DEVINE** *crouches under the bench.)*

(Heavy footsteps approach – pounding, urgent.)

*(***TRAY** *runs onto the playground.)*

(She watches him from under the bench.)

TRAY. D
aw dammit
Yo D
you out here baby

D

*(***TRAY** *scans the playground desperately.)*

(He spots her.)

(under his breath) shit

(He crosses to the bench carefully, gets down on his knees.)

(He looks at her face, which is perfectly blank.)

Oh god D
I

(She doesn't move.)

(He swears at himself again, quickly under his breath.)

(He speaks to her gently as if calming a frightened horse.)

It's okay mami I'm here
You okay now
It's me
come on baby

(He holds out a hand.)

Come on D
please
I straight fucked up today boo
I know it
But we gotta go home now
and
We gon make us some grill cheese and tomato soup
and you gon do your Dora worksheets for school and and
you gon get your bath and your fuzzy orange jammers and
we gon go find that dang Waldo on page 12 and then

TRAY. *(cont.)* oh yo
When Grams come home from work tonight
she said y'all gon talk about your swan dance outfit
get your swan dance on
and
come on baby girl
I'm here now
You okay now
please

(She nods.)

(She takes his hand and crawls out.)

TRAY. Shit
you just soakin mami
hold up

(He takes a clean t-shirt from his gym bag and towels her off with it, then takes off his jacket and wraps her in it.)

Sorry bout bein late
I ain't mean to I
shit
I just
am so sorry
for real D

(He looks at her.)

(She looks back, the blankness almost gone.)

(They breathe together.)

(She nods, he nods back.)

(He puts his bag over his shoulder and holds out his hand.)

(She takes it.)

(The world around them shifts slightly: softer, muted, the light warmer even through the drizzle.)

(They walk home.)

TRAY. So how was your day kid

DEVINE. I ain't a swan

TRAY. You
what now

DEVINE. Ain't a swan

TRAY. Right
DEVINE. Ima tree
TRAY. (what are we talking about) A tree
DEVINE. Yeah
Ima be a weeping willow
TRAY. (no idea what we're talking about) Oh word
DEVINE. Yeah
Ima stand over the Lake of Swan Tears
TRAY. You gon
Oh yeah yeah okay I got you
This for your afterschool dance thing
DEVINE. Ima be a weeping willow
by the Lake of Swan Tears
Get it

(Slight pause.)

*(***TRAY** *does not get it.)*

weeping
*will*ow
lake of
tears
TRAY. Got it
You gon be a
Wait
Hold up
You gotta be a *tree*
DEVINE. Yeah
TRAY. What the other kids
DEVINE. They the swans
TRAY. (that's fucked up) And you a *tree*
DEVINE. Yeah
I do like

(They stop walking.)

(She does her tree pose – she throws a little swagger on it.)

And the swans
they be doin like

(She waves her arms, sketching in the swans flapping around and past her tree, excited to be showing him the dance.)

TRAY. Nah nah
That's fucked up man

DEVINE. *(confused about what he means)* Well
but cuz

TRAY. Why you gotta be the tree

*(***DEVINE***'s face falls.)*

DEVINE. I
dunno

(Pause.)

*(***DEVINE** *pulls nervously at the loose hem of her t-shirt.)*

*(***TRAY** *realizes what he's done, kicks himself silently.)*

(They keep walking.)

TRAY. Yo
Tree's da bomb sister

*(***DEVINE** *shrugs.)*

For real
A tree's like
Trees is whassup
They all
makin oxygen and shit

*(***DEVINE** *ignores him.)*

You gon be the flyest tree anybody ever did see

*(***DEVINE** *ignores him.)*

Come on girl
Show me that tree move again

*(***DEVINE** *keeps walking.)*

*(***TRAY** *stops.)*

Aight then
I do it

(He strikes a silly tree pose.)

Whassup

*(***DEVINE** *looks at him, sniffs disdainfully, looks away.)*

(He strikes another pose.)

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