

Shadow's Bloom
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PWR 91EPA, Fall 2022

Setting:

A primarily Black and Latinx urban neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia. Action takes place in the neighborhood's community garden and in the home of Saraya and Jasper.

Characters:

Saraya (she/her): a Black woman, a single mother to Jasper, early-30s (later mid-40s), warm and stubborn

Jasper (she/her): a Black student, Saraya's daughter, 6 years old (later 20), grows alongside the garden, attends college at UCSD, optimistic and determined

Ayele (he/him): a Black man, Saraya and Jasper's neighbor, late 30s (later late 40s/early 50s), started the community garden after the death of his son, comedic and pessimistic yet compassionate

Candice (she/her): a Black woman in the neighborhood, witty, strong-willed, playful

Cesar (he/him): a young Latinx man in the neighborhood, late 20s (later late 30s/early 40s), married to Rio, energetic and quick-witted

Rio (he/him): a young Latinx man in the neighborhood, late 20s (later late 30s/early 40s), married to Cesar, quiet and empathetic, rational

Laurel (she/her): an elderly woman of color in the neighborhood, married to Mica, early 50s (later 60s)

Mica (he/him): an elderly man of color in the neighborhood, married to Laurel, mid 50s (later late 60s)

Jen (she/her): a young white woman that moves into the neighborhood later, married to Wyatt, has a new baby, critical of the garden

Wyatt (he/him): a young white man that moves into the neighborhood later, married to Jen, has a new baby, reluctant to help with the garden

Doug (he/him): a city scientist who comes to the neighborhood to get a soil sample for testing

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Autumn. Evening. Center stage, Saraya and Jasper sit in their neighborhood's community garden. This is the second year of the garden's life. A butterfly flutters in front of them, and Jasper watches in amazement.

JASPER

What is it, mama?

SARAYA

It's called a monarch butterfly. It's movin' south for the winter.

JASPER

I never seen one before!

SARAYA

Well, see this plant here? *She points to a green shrub with spiky leaves.* Ayele put it in our garden. When the monarch is a baby, the caterpillar eats this. Then it grows into a big ol' butterfly.

JASPER

She ponders for a bit. Hmm, if I move south, can I be a monarchy too?

SARAYA

Chuckling. If you're movin' south, sugar, we better pack up quick. *She stands and puts on a jacket.*

JASPER

Still sitting. But I like the butterfly! Why does it have to leave?

SARAYA

That's what it does, baby. It lives here with us until it gets too cold and has to go away.

JASPER

Can Ayele grow more of the plant? So the monarchy can stay?

SARAYA

She helps Jasper put on her jacket. We can ask him.

JASPER

Why did Ayele put all these plants here? For the monarchy?

SARAYA

Ayele built this garden for his son. And now we all take care of it. We all give it love.

JASPER

Where is Ayele's son? I don't see him!

SARAYA

I guess he had to go away too. *She helps Jasper up and kisses her on the cheek.* Let's go home, baby. We'll come back tomorrow.

Saraya and Jasper exit, holding hands.

Scene 2

The next day. Daytime. In the garden, community members gather, tend to the garden, and discuss happenings in the city.

CANDICE

Shoveling rocks out of a section of earth. And then he was talkin' 'bout "you needa new receptionist." Like, I barely spilled anything on him. No sir, *you* needa new *personality*.

RIO

Ay, maybe you can join me and Cesar on a new-job hunt! We were just talking about what's next for us.

CESAR

But I'd avoid anything with plants if I were you, Candice. *He peers over at her work.* Are you digging a hole to the sky?

CANDICE

She stops shoveling and laughs. Who are you judging? Your job is just to drop the little seeds in there.

LAUREL

Holding up a handful of crushed flowers to Candice. Honey, I got a brown thumb too, and I ain't ashamed!

SARAYA

Oh, you're doing fine, Laurel. Gardening is hard work!
She trims weeds with scissors.

JASPER

This is fun! I wanna be a gardener when I'm old like you, Candice.
She helps Saraya by ripping weeds out of the ground with her hands.

CANDICE

She turns. Child!

RIO

He fake whispers. It's okay, Jasper, Candice *is* getting up there in age.

CANDICE

Rio, I gotta shovel, and heck if I don't use it!

AYELE

Playfully pointing his shovel at them all. Y'all remember we've only been at this for a year—cut Candace some slack! A couple years ago, I never thought I'd be doing manual labor in my own neighborhood.

CESAR

Me neither, but I wouldn't change it for the damn world.

MICA

I even feel younger bein' out here. The smell of mint is reminding me of walking home from school. It's good to have a patch of green 'round this place.

AYELE

I'm thinking of startin' one of them snappy chats just to show off this squash.

SARAYA

And the neighborhood feels happier. My home feels happier. Jasper talks about this spot all damn day. I haven't heard her make this much noise since she came out of me.

LAUREL

Mica and me been saying how peculiar it is. I grew up in the south. I 'member bein' kicked outta libraries 'cause of my skin. This garden's the first place I really feel in control.

CANDICE

It almost distracts you from the rest of the world, being out here.

SARAYA

Hell knows we need a distraction. Every time I leave this neighborhood, my stomach drops. It's some act of violence there, someone losing their job, a kid unsafe at school. *She pulls Jasper into her lap.*

AYELE

Listen now, this garden keeps us safe. It's better than any police they could bring up in here. You ain't gonna mulch the gardenias with me on Sunday then steal from me on Tuesday.

They all laugh.

RIO

And with all the crime and storms and deaths, the city just keeps telling us not to worry. I don't even read the news anymore.

CESAR

Amen to that.

SARAYA

Us neither, our TV stays off most days.

CANDICE

So y'all didn't hear about that new coal plant they're building in the next county?

The energy shifts. There's a still, a hesitation.

LAUREL

A new coal plant?

MICA

I thought they were supposed to be stopping this coal stuff. With the government and the climate—

CANDICE

It's supposed to be "cleaner" but it's still burning coal.

There's silence.

Sorry, y'all. I didn't mean to—

AYELE

I read about it. I don't got much to say.

SARAYA

It's not right what they're doing.

CESAR

Ayele, if you wanna talk—

AYELE

We don't need to get into this, y'all. It's getting dark anyhow.

They all put down their tools and gather near the shed to rest. Jasper lays on Saraya's lap.

RIO

I just don't understand what's going wrong. They know these plants are unsafe. We're supposed to be building solar panels not fossil fuel factories.

AYELE

I mean, it's the same people doing that shit in our county. Not even half a mile away you got them dumping the county's trash and stewing up some honest-to-god potion.

CANDICE

That waste plant gives me the creeps. I turn up my music when I drive past on the way to work.

RIO

Ay dios mío, I swear a bird dropped dead in front of me just from looking over there.

SARAYA

And we never got a say in them building that. Even though we're living with it. That facility's been there not even five years and we never even got a letter about it.

CESAR

Right? I would've brought that glorified landfill a casserole or a pie if I'd only known.

CANDICE

And then they're saying in their fancy reports that *we're* dirty and poor. Like, please, you're so cheap you put a hazardous waste facility next to a neighborhood. Full of *people*.

LAUREL

Mmm, and a neighborhood with all these Black folk and folk of color at that.

SARAYA

Exactly! They keep it far away from them white neighborhoods for a reason. They think we can't fight back.

CESAR

Preach!

SARAYA

And if I'm honest, sometimes *I* think we can't.

RIO

I wonder that all the time. We didn't even know it was happening. How could we have rallied and shouted after it was done?

SARAYA

At least it's over there and not here in our garden. We're safe as long as we take care of this plot of land. We can eat what we grow here and shake our fists at them.

AYELE

Hell, I'm still surprised we got the money to buy out this land. Filling out that grant application took an arm and a leg.

MICA

We remember! Asking for codes and dimensions as if we're city planners.

AYELE

But I'm grateful for it. Man, I'm grateful. This garden's been getting me through some shit— (*he glances at Jasper*) some *stuff*. *He looks around*. You all too. Y'all are my family.

SARAYA

Well, *shit*, we're grateful for you. You made this happen. And we're here for you.

JASPER

Looking up at Saraya. I'm here for poo!

They all laugh.

SARAYA

And with that, I think we should head home.

JASPER

Can I pick a flower?

SARAYA

Oh, it's late, baby—

CANDICE

One flower won't hurt her! Go ahead, child, and pick a pretty one.

Lights dim. Jasper picks a petunia from the garden, crushing its petals with her fingers. She admires it and brings it to Saraya. She and Saraya exit offstage.

Slowly, the rest of the community disperses. The scene shifts as time passes. They each exit, and the garden evolves into a less lush, duller version of itself.

Scene 3

14 years into the future. Summer. Afternoon. Jasper returns home from college for the summer. A welcome-home party for Jasper at the garden takes place, but the plants are all covered in tarp. The people have aged.

CANDICE

They been feeding you good out in Hollywood?

JASPER

She chuckles. Candice, you know I'm not living in Hollywood. And not as good as here. Nothing beats your nachos!

CANDICE

Well shit, Jasper, I thought you were gonna be a big-shot out there. Going to parties and red carpets.

JASPER

Not so much. I'm studying environmental systems. It's like ecology and geology all in one program. Not many chances to be on TV.

AYELE

You learning about rocks over there at UCSD? Well I'll tell you—I'm going to UCS-ABCD to become a fancy scientist too!

JASPER

As if you're not a fancy scientist already! How're things at the clinic? Congratulations on the promotion, by the way.

AYELE

Ah, same ol', same ol'. People coming in left and right with broken bones and STIs. Alcohol poisoning and asthma. A lot of asthma. And cancer.

CANDICE

I heard a bunch of them kids at the schools were needing inhalers.

RIO

Ay dios mío, it won't be long before we all need something. I've been so busy at work I'm getting hives.
Cesar rubs Rio's shoulders.

CESAR

It's because you've been cooped up in the office for weeks. We gotta get you out in the sun. Free the Latino!

LAUREL

Yeah, we haven't seen you too around the garden as much. Kai got you busy?

JASPER

How is Kai? She was growing like crazy before I left.

CESAR

Tell me why this child thought it'd be a good idea to wake me up at 4am last night saying she has to pee? To pee? At 4am? At that point, just wet the bed, my love.

RIO

Rolling his eyes. But *you* wanted to adopt, Cesar.
They laugh.

CANDICE

Bring her to the garden. Working out here'll discipline a kid like nobody's business. Jasper used to waddle around with a shovel in one hand and tomatoes in the other, and now she's off in Hollywood.

MICA

And she would chase those bugs all around the neighborhood. What did she call those butterflies?

SARAYA

Gasping. The monarchies!

JASPER

Oh my god! I called monarch butterflies monarchies until I was like 15!

CANDICE

Sugar, you were too cute for us to correct you!

JASPER

Gosh, I missed every second of being here when I was gone.

LAUREL

It hasn't been the same without you this past year, honey.

AYELE

I been having to add mulch all by my lonesome.

JASPER

That's another thing about school—the vegetables are not nearly as good as yours, Ayele! They have this bitter yellow squash that they chop up into little chunks and boil, then they never use any seasoning.

CANDICE

Even the chefs are white? Ah hell nah!

AYELE

Well, you're not missin' out on much. There's hasn't been too much squash growing around here the last couple of years anyways.

MICA

Not much of anything growing. We was gettin' depressed looking at them wilting and such.

JASPER

She looks with concern at the garden. What do you think is happening? Everything seemed fine a few years ago—

The conversation is cut short when a couple, Jen and Wyatt, passes by the garden. Wyatt pushes a baby in a stroller.

JENN

To Wyatt. Oh my goodness, the realtor wasn't lying! *To the community.* This is adorable!

There's silence. The community takes in the new couple.

CANDICE

Hey, y'all. Did ya get lost?

JENN

Oh, of course! So sorry! I'm Jenn. This is Wyatt. We're new to the neighborhood. We're so excited to be here and to meet all of you on our first week in.

JASPER

Welcome to the neighbo–

JENN

And I'm so surprised because the realtor said there was a garden in this neighborhood, and I thought he was lying because it seemed so out of place.

The baby in the stroller begins to cry.

But Wyatt, this place isn't nearly as...*nice* as the realtor made it sem. Didn't the realtor say there was like a vegetable garden? Like, for food?

WYATT

Trying to shush the baby.

I don't remember.

AYELE

Well, ma'am, we do grow veg–

JENN

And he didn't mention the smell either. I can see that, like, *landfill* thing from here. It feels like we're walking into a fog. Cover your nose! *She giggles to herself.*

WYATT

He picks up the baby.

Babe, maybe we shouldn't be out here so close to that place. It's probably dangerous.

JENN

This area is cute, though. You're all doing great work. You know, Wyatt, maybe we should come and help. You know I have a friend who lived on that farm. Not the baby, of course. It wouldn't be safe for his little body, being around all of this concrete and asphalt and dirt.

WYATT

Still shushing the baby. Getting annoyed.

Gardening's not my thing.

CANDICE

We appreciate it, but we're doing just fine out here, ma'am.

CESAR

Yeah, we've got it covered. *He flashes a sarcastic thumbs-up.*

JENN

Oh no, no no, I just thought we might lend a hand. And what with the property taxes and things going up around here, you should have more help. (*To Wyatt*) No, they should! And to think, you all could sell these... these... plants, and invest back into the neighborhood. You're practically growing flowers in trash, no wonder they look so sad. It's not your fault.

WYATT

Still shushing the baby. Getting annoyed.
Jenn, we should get going.

JENN

Oh, crap, we have that housewarming thing! Ugh, we have to run, guys, but such a pleasure to meet you. This (*she gestures to the garden*) is lovely, really.

They exit. There are a few beats of silence before anyone stops reeling enough to speak.

CANDICE

So... nice neighbors.

JASPER

I am the only one hoping they move out soon?

AYELE

Well, at least it's good to know we're not crazy for bein' worried about the garden.

CANDICE

I don't believe for a minute they care about this place. They just want a project.

RIO

(*To Jasper*) We don't have a clue why we've been failing, but we've been thinking of adding fertilizer or trying to grow something different.

SARAYA

We thought about ripping everything out and starting again, but it's a lot of work. And this place means too much to us to destroy it.

LAUREL

Things can change real quick around here.

JASPER

Well, what can we do?

CESAR

Who's to say?

AYELE

We're just holding out for the next season, but this fall's harvest is gonna be doozy.

He lifts a corner of the tarp and pulls out a discolored and rotted vegetable, which turns to mush in his grip.

It begins to rain.

CESAR

Well, I think that's the cue that we're turning into sad zombies. We should head out. Jasper, welcome home.

JASPER

Thank you all for this. I missed you. And I'm sorry this is happening.

Various community members bug Jasper, and the party disperses. Saraya and Jasper head home.

Scene 4

That night. In Saraya and Jasper's home. Rain continues to patter outside.

JASPER

I just don't know how I didn't see these things before. You know, we've been talking a lot about pollution and health in my classes and how waste facilities like that are toxic. Even if it isn't doing this to our garden, it's at least *one* of our enemies.

SARAYA

Tidying up the living room. Oh, believe me, we noticed. We just don't have the fancy words for it like you do. Pollution and toxins. Next thing you'll be teaching me some seven-syllable word about what's in our dish soap.

JASPER

Laughing. Right, you know this already. It's just been so exciting to learn and to have the language to use about it. I was always wary of that place but never really thought it could be harming us. And it's like, we're living right next to this huge waste plant and expected to just keep living.

SARAYA

Mmm, and things have only been gettin' worse.

JASPER

It wasn't this bad when I left. The neighborhood looks gray, it's overcast in shadows.

SARAYA

Well, you don't always come home for the summer. When you're here for the holidays in the winter, we ain't doin' too much gardening anyways. A lot can happen in three years.

JASPER

Mama, I'm sorry for going so far away—

SARAYA

Don't be sorry for chasing your dreams.

JASPER

I know you wanted me to stay.

SARAYA

It's just been a lot. We've done so much healing over nearly two decades but the sufferin' never ends. It was better when I had you to heal with me.

JASPER

But everyone is here for you.

SARAYA

There's not enough love to go around when everybody's hurting. They're buildin' new coal plants everyday it feels like. They've been dumping in that landfill day and night, right outside our windows.

JASPER

I could feel it when we were all together. Hell, I even felt it in the earth. It wasn't the same being out there. It's like the soil is bitter and it's seeping into your bodies. I've been learning about soil and how it holds onto chemical and how—

SARAYA

They got you so worked up over dirt in that school? Maybe going to California was bad for the brain.

JASPER

But really. I'm sorry I haven't been here. But something's happening, and we *will* fix it.

SARAYA

You don't need to apologize or get worked up, baby. We're just happy you're here now.

Lights out.

ACT TWO

Scene 1

Weeks later. Daytime. The community is the garden. Movements are slower, less enthusiastic. Coughing can be heard. The community seems restless.

LAUREL

What do you call this man, again?

JASPER

He's some city official. Maybe a scientist? He's just coming in to collect a sample, then he'll be gone.

LAUREL

You really trust some stranger to come in and dig through our garden?

AYELE

As much as I don't trust him, I can't think of another way to find out what's goin' on.

JASPER

And it was surprisingly easy to set up. It's not super expensive. They have a quick turnaround.

CANDICE

Jasper, tell us how much it cost so we can pitch in.

JASPER

It's really not a problem.

RIO

Jasper—

JASPER

Seriously, it's not a big deal! I've been working at the library on campus.

They all give her blank stares.

CANDICE

Child.

They all burst into laughter.

JASPER

Hey, they pay more than minimum wage! I'm serious. Please, let me give you all this.

MICA

We can bicker about money later—he's walking up the road now.

Doug, a city official, enters.

JASPER

Hi, are you Douglas?

DOUG

He nods once. 'Doug' will be fine.

SARAYA

Doug, we appreciate you comin' out. This is our garden. We just wanna know why our plants have been dyin' all of the sudden.

DOUG

Well, let's hop to it then.

Doug works on getting a soil sample.

CESAR

So looking at this place, what do you think the problem could be?

DOUG

Hard to say. Could be you're growing the wrong plants or not giving 'em enough water. Could be animals eating 'em. I'm no scientist, just here to pick up some dirt.

RIO

Surely you've talked to people. We're worried there's something in the earth causing this, making the plants die.

DOUG

Something in the earth?

CANDICE

Like whatever that waste plant over there is spewing out.

DOUG

Agh, people get worked up over stuff like that all the time. You won't die from some trash. The USDA sets standards for whatcha can and can't handle and hell, we can pretty much handle any chemicals or fertilizers known to god. I go around digging in dirt like this all the damn time and I'm healthy.

JASPER

But if these chemicals are unsafe, we need to know if they can affect us over here. We just wanna know if we should be worried.

DOUG

Y'all are gonna be fine. But even if it's not fine, you can just rip out this little garden and go to the grocery store.

He finishes collecting the sample and promptly prepares to leave.

Alright, you folk have a good day and keep an eye out for the results.

Doug exits. The community waits a beat before exiting. Lights fade.

Scene 2

Two weeks later. Daytime. In the garden. The community is gathered around Candice's laptop, peering over her shoulder.

CANDICE

These assholes!

JASPER

Peeking over Saraya's shoulder. What does it say?

CANDICE

I don't know, I haven't read it yet. But they're still assholes.

She opens the soil testing report.

RIO

Vale, the soil testing report says...ay dios mío, this is long.

CESAR

So it looks like it's below optimum on almost all of these. Are these the good chemicals or the bad ones?

JASPER

These are the good ones. We're missing a ton of nutrients the soil should have. Nitrogen, potassium...probably why the plants aren't growing.

LAUREL

But then here: lead, arsenic, mang—Jasper, what does all this mean? We just wanna know if we can eat the damn food.

JASPER

This looks really bad.

SARAYA

This bar means there's more than there should be?

MICA

My eyes ain't too good anymore, but that bar looks real high.

JASPER

Those are heavy metals. They're really toxic to humans, and they definitely shouldn't be in a garden.

CESAR

So how'd they get here?

JASPER

They can come from factories or fertilizers. If I had to guess, I'd blame that waste facility.

CANDICE

But then in the recommendations, it says there's no cause for concern. Chemical contamination ain't bad enough for intervention. No cause for action. Blah, blah, blah.

RIO

So they're basically saying there's nothing wrong? When they found all these chemicals in our soil? These scientists have gotta be idiots. Why don't they walk around that waste plant a couple times and tell me this is healthy.

AYELE

What's here at the bottom?

JASPER

It's recommending fertilizer for the nutrient deficiencies. Yeah, because adding more synthetic chemicals is just what we need.

SARAYA

Maybe it isn't that bad, then? If they ain't tellin' us to leave, we shouldn't get worked up.

CANDICE

They don't know what the fuck they're talking about!

JASPER

It's just—I can't believe this. It's right here in front of us that there are heavy metals in this land. We're basically being poisoned, and they just get to shrug their shoulders.

LAUREL

Not just in the soil. We touch this earth. It's probably in our clothes, in our homes.

MICA

We breathe it in every day.

CESAR

Oh god, and we eat what we grow here.

CANDICE

So does this mean we stop gardening?

AYELE

No, we don't stop. We don't need their fancy lingo to tell us what we already know. We been knowin' for years that waste plant can't be good for us.

JASPER

But Ayele, we didn't know how bad this would be. This is really dangerous—

AYELE

They should tell it to the assholes spitting on us from their ivory tower!

RIO

I think we need to sit and talk about this.

CANDICE

I don't know, it don't feel like we should be out here no more.

AYELE

They can write what they want in that report. This place belongs to us.

SARAYA

Well, slow down, they ain't telling us to stop gardening yet.

RIO

But they clearly don't care about our safety if they're haven't sent anyone out here to help.

AYELE

They took enough from us already. They ain't gonna take this away too.

SARAYA

Ayele, this is about all of us.

RIO

We're in this together. Our community—

AYELE

This was never about our community! That man who came here doesn't care about our people. He doesn't care about any of us.

LAUREL

We can't blame one person for this. It's society. It's our enemy. It don't ever end, yet we still here.

MICA

We're here, but we ain't living good if this is what we been eatin'.

AYELE

We leave these neighborhoods and have enough to deal with in the world. We can't even come home and build something for ourselves.

JASPER

Ayele, we *did* build something for ourselves. You should be proud—

RIO

This isn't a death sentence. But now that we know what's going on, we should think about how to be safe and protect ourselves.

CESAR

I don't think that we should abandon this place, but maybe we should all take a breather.

SARAYA

Choosing to let this go is about self-preservation. It's about protecting ourselves.

JASPER

We can't keep living the way we have been.

LAUREL

But it don't matter much if we're already living in it. We been here for over 20 years.

MICA

And this dead garden is all we got to show for it.

SARAYA

This land ain't good for us, Ayele.

AYELE

This land, this garden, is more than just land. It's home. It is our community. Our life. They destroy this land, they destroy our lives. How could we make our lives even a little better when we listen to every word they say?

SARAYA

Becoming angry. How do we get better when you won't let go of your past? This is about all of us!

AYELE

We're surrounded by death because of people who don't even care enough to come down here and see this garden for themselves. My son is in the ground because of those people!

He pushes himself out of his chair and exits.

LAUREL

Can we even call this our land? Do we lay claim to something we can't control? Something that's hurting us?

MICA

I don't know. But I got a headache now, Laurel.

Mica and Laurel link hands and exit.

CANDICE

So this ain't gonna be an easy question to answer. We gonna leave this place to rot until we make up our minds?

RIO

Everyone just needs time to think. (To *Cesar*) Let's go, mi amor.

Rio and Cesar exit.

CANDICE

(To *Jasper and Saraya*). You ladies get some rest now.

She exits wearily.

There is a moment of thick, sad silence.

JASPER

What the fuck.

SARAYA

Jasper—

JASPER

I never knew.

SARAYA

Baby, it was a hard time for all of us.

JASPER

That's why Ayele want to save this place so badly?

SARAYA

His son died a few years after you were born from workin' in them coal plants. He got lung cancer. Ayele tried to sue, but you know how it goes. We did some rallies. We had a funeral.

JASPER

I don't remember any of it.

SARAYA

You were so little. We didn't talk much about it after the rallies.

JASPER

His son deserves justice. Was the coal plant held accountable? Did they shut it down?

SARAYA

Oh, we tried to get 'em to tear it down. Nothin' came of it. Nothin' does most of the time. Ayele started this place to take back what was taken from us. To make our air clean and our patch of earth pretty. To honor his son. To grow our own food since those people out there can't seem to give a damn.

JASPER

So we could rely on ourselves. And now we can't even do that.

SARAYA

It's all connected, it seems—that coal factory, this waste plant, this garden, our bodies.

JASPER

We never did have control over our community. Even then, we were being poisoned. He lost his son to probably the same chemicals in our soil right now.

SARAYA

And now he's gonna lose this too.

JASPER

We might not lose it. There are things we try—

SARAYA

It's not lookin' like a win for us.

JASPER

What do we do, mama?

SARAYA

I'm startin' to believe there's nothin' we can do.

Lights dim.

Scene 3

A few days later. Afternoon. Ayele is alone in the garden, humming to himself.

Candice enters.

CANDICE

Now, Ayele, you know you ain't supposed to be out here. None of us touched this place since that test.

Ayele glances up at her then looks away.

CANDICE

We been callin' you. I figured you snuck out here after work.

No response from Ayele.

Shit, I know it's a Monday, but you ain't gotta look so grim. Them heavy metals get to your brain?

She walks over and ruffles Ayele's hair/nudges his head.

AYELE

Just thinkin' 'bout all the ways we been screwed over.

CANDICE

Look around, Ayele. We got homes. We got AC. We got water. We got a community that cares. This garden don't gotta define us.

AYELE

What defines us is a choice we should get to make.

They sit in silence.

AYELE

Before this garden, we hadn't been outside much. I didn't think much about the land. How it could be hurting like me.

CANDICE

Mmm, and this ain't exactly a neighborhood full of fresh air anyhow.

AYELE

We know why we living like this. The county, heck, the whole city, knows too. But either they don't care or they ain't got the power to do anything about it.

CANDICE

I'm sorry you're hurting. You know we gotchu.

Cesar, Rio, and Jasper enter, in conversation.

RIO

We were hoping to find you here, Ayele.

AYELE

(Sighing under his breath) Can't get a moment alone out here.
Candice laughs.

JASPER

Ayele, we've been reading, and I think we can make this work.

AYELE

Much as I love this place, I can't be puttin' you'll in danger.

JASPER

Well, there are some plants we can grow that will help take the chemicals out of the soil, like sunflowers.

RIO

And we can use compost. My abuela used to put her banana peels and coffee grounds in her garden. She said it made the plants happy.

CESAR

And if we wear gloves, we won't have to touch the soil too much.

JASPER

And maybe masks. So we aren't breathing this stuff in.

CANDICE

Is breathin' it in bad for us?

JASPER

Any way we contact the soil, even eating what grows from it, can expose us to toxins. They've probably been in our bodies for decades.

CANDICE

Well, look at your fancy Hollywood education finally going to good use.

JASPER

Laughing. You thought I'd leave and not come back to share what I learned?

RIO

We'll have to be careful, but we don't have to stop gardening altogether.

JASPER

And if we can get the money, we could build raised beds. We can fill them with soil and move the plants into those so they're not trying to grow in this ground.

AYELE

I'll look for more grants and make some calls to see if the city'll help. And to push again for 'em to take that waste plant away from our homes.

JASPER

We still have some people to convince, but Ayele, this means a lot to everyone.

CESAR

I'll talk to Laurel and Mica. They're older, they might be worried about working out here. But they want to find other ways to help.

CANDICE

Jasper, where's Saraya?

JASPER

My mama hasn't been feeling too good the last couple of days. She just needs some time, but she'll come around. This is important to her too.

RIO

When she sees the work we're doing, she'll want to help. We're taking the reigns again.

AYELE

We tried the rallies. We tried protesting at the county office. Now all we got is ourselves.

CESAR

And that's more than enough.

JASPER

Nobody out here is teaching us how to be safe in our own neighborhood, so we're gonna have to learn on our own.

RIO

We're going to save ourselves until the county or the government or whoever comes to their senses. We'll fight back by not giving up.

AYELE

Well, shit, let's get to it, then.

Lights out.

Scene 4

Evening. The end of the summer. Jasper enters and kneels at the garden, center stage, amidst the dying plants and wreckage and picks at the soil. Saraya enters and stands away from the garden.

JASPER

When I get back from school, I can help more. I know what I need to learn. I know what questions to ask. And I'll come back and I'll help, mama.

SARAYA

I know.

JASPER

Maybe the garden will grow better this season with the compost and the—

SARAYA

Jasper—

JASPER

We're going to rebuild it.

SARAYA

She kneels beside Jasper and picks a flower.

There are just some things we can't save, baby.

JASPER

We've saved ourselves before. We can do it again. No one else is gonna do it for us.

Lights up on Cesar and Rio stage right.

SARAYA

We're so tired of saving ourselves. This neighborhood is getting old. We've been here long enough to know change comes too slowly.

JASPER

We're stronger than this pain. Our strength is what started this garden all those years ago. We planted this out of grief, and we sowed a family.

Lights up on Candice stage left. Lights up on Laurel and Mica stage left, a bit further from the garden.

SARAYA

Feeling this pain and letting it hurt is reality, Jasper. And that doesn't mean we stopped caring. It just means that we're tired.

Lights up on Ayele downstage center, beside Saraya and Jasper. All characters are now lit onstage.

JASPER

But we have to keep trying.

SARAYA

I know.

JASPER

Promise you'll help rebuild while I'm gone.

SARAYA

I promise I'll try.

JASPER

It won't be easy. And it won't happen quickly. Maybe not even in a few years. But we have to have hope.

SARAYA

We will.

*The community works on the garden, pulling weeds, watering, massaging compost into the soil.
The same butterfly from the opening scene flies past. Lights fade out.*