JAY-Z

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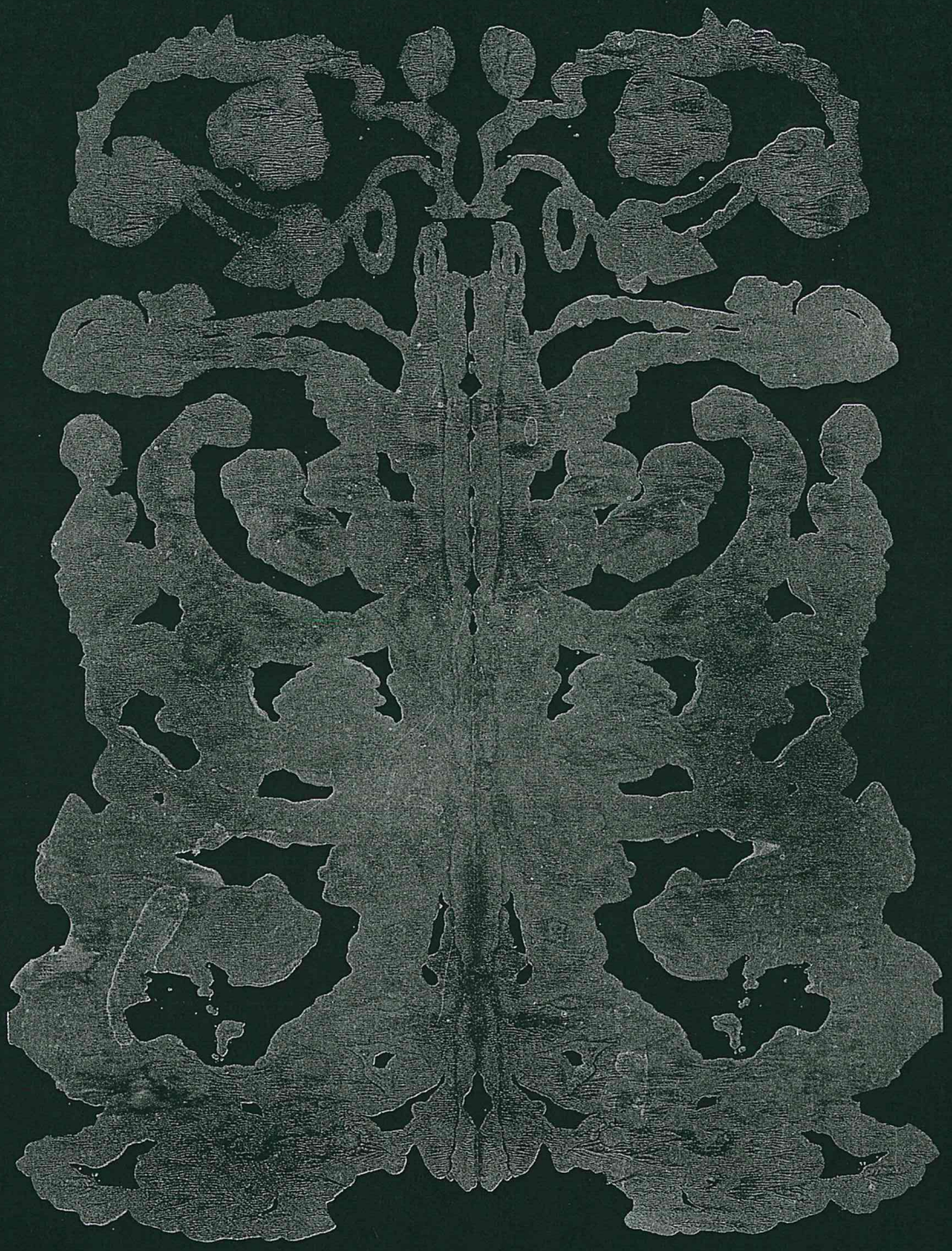


THE STREET SIGNS FOR FLUSHING, MARCY, NOSTRAND, AND MYRTLE AVENUES SEEMED LIKE METAL FLAGS TO ME: BED-STUY WAS MY COUNTRY, BROOKLYN MY PLANET.

Marcy sat on top of the G train, which connects Brooklyn to Queens, but not to the city. For Marcy kids, Manhattan is where your parents went to work, if they were lucky, and where we'd yellow-bus it with our elementary class on special trips. I'm from New York, but I didn't know that at nine. The street signs for Flushing, Marcy, Nostrand, and Myrtle avenues seemed like metal flags to me: Bed-Stuy was my country, Brooklyn my planet.

When I got a little older Marcy would show me its menace, but for a kid in the seventies, it was mostly an adventure, full of concrete corners to turn, dark hallways to explore, and everywhere other kids. When you jumped the fences to play football on the grassy patches that passed for a park, you might find the field studded with glass shards that caught the light like diamonds and would pierce your sneakers just as fast. Turning one of those concrete corners you might bump into your older brother clutching dollar bills over a dice game, *Cee-Lo* being called out like hardcore bingo. It was the seventies and heroin was still heavy in the hood, so we would dare one another to push a leaning nodder off a bench the way kids on farms tip sleeping cows. The unpredictability was one of the things we counted on. Like the day when I wandered up to something I'd never seen before: a cipher—but I wouldn't have called it that; no one would've back then. It was just a circle of scrappy, ashy, skinny Brooklyn kids laughing and clapping their hands, their eyes trained on the center. I might have been with my cousin B-High, but I might have been alone, on my way home from playing baseball with my Little League squad. I shouldered through the crowd toward the middle—or maybe B-High cleared the way—but it felt like gravity pulling me into that swirl of kids, no bullshit, like a planet pulled into orbit by a star.

His name was Slate and he was a kid I used to see around the neighborhood, an older kid who barely made an impression. In the circle, though, he was transformed, like the church ladies touched by the spirit, and everyone was mesmerized. He was rhyming, throwing out couplet after couplet like he was in a trance, for a crazy long time—thirty minutes straight off the top of his head, never losing the beat, riding the handclaps. He rhymed about nothing—the sidewalk, the benches—or he'd go in on the kids who were standing around listening to him, call out someone's leaning sneakers or dirty Lee jeans. And then he'd go in on how clean he was, how nice he was with the ball, how all our girls loved him. Then he'd just start rhyming about the rhymes themselves, how good

they were, how much better they were than yours, how he was the best that ever did it, in all five boroughs and beyond. He never stopped moving, not dancing, just rotating in the center of the circle, looking for his next target. The sun started to set, the crowd moved in closer, the next clap kept coming, and he kept meeting it with another rhyme. It was like watching some kind of combat, but he was alone in the center. All he had were his eyes, taking in everything, and the words inside him. I was dazzled. *That's some cool shit* was the first thing I thought. Then: *I could* do *that.*

That night, I started writing rhymes in my spiral notebook. From the beginning it was easy, a constant flow. For days I filled page after page. Then I'd bang a beat out on the table, my bedroom window, whatever had a flat surface, and practice from the time I woke in the morning until I went to sleep. My mom would think I was up watching TV, but I'd be in the kitchen pounding on the table, rhyming. One day she brought a three-ring binder home from work for me to write in. The paper in the binder was unlined, and I filled every blank space on every page. My rhymes looked real chaotic, crowded against one another, some vertical, some slanting into the corners, but when I looked at them the order was clear.

I connected with an older kid who had a reputation as the best rapper in Marcy—Jaz was his name—and we started practicing our rhymes into a heavy-ass tape recorder with a makeshift mic attached. The first time I heard our voices playing back on tape, I realized that a recording captures you, but plays back a distortion—a different voice from the one you hear in your own head, even though I could recognize myself instantly. I saw it as an opening, a way to re-create myself and reimagine my world. After I recorded a rhyme, it gave me an unbelievable rush to play it back, to hear that voice.

One time a friend peeked inside my notebook and the next day I saw him in school, reciting my rhymes like they were his. I started writing real tiny so no one could steal my lyrics, and then I started straight hiding my book, stuffing it in my mattress like it was cash. Everywhere I went I'd write. If I was crossing a street with my friends and a rhyme came to me, I'd break out my binder, spread it on a mailbox or lamppost and write the rhyme before I crossed the street. I didn't care if my friends left me at the light, I had to get it out. Even back then, I thought I was the best.

I'm the king of hip-hop / Renewed like Reeboks / Key in the lock / Rhymes so provocative / As long as I live

There were some real talents in Marcy. DJs started setting up sound systems in the project courtyards and me and Jaz and other MCs from around the way would battle one another for hours. It wasn't like that first cipher I saw: the crowds were more serious now and the beat was kept by eight-foot-tall speakers with subwoofers that would rattle the windows of the apartments around us. I was good at battling and I practiced it like a sport. I'd spend free time reading the dictionary, building my vocabulary for battles. I could be ruthless, calm as fuck on the outside, but flooded with adrenaline, because the other rapper was coming for me, too. It wasn't a Marquess of Queensberry situation. I saw niggas get swung on when the rhymes cut too deep. But mostly, as dangerous as it felt, it stayed lyrical. I look back now and it still amazes me how intense those moments were, back when there was nothing at stake but your rep, your desire to be the best poet on the block.

I wasn't even in high school yet and I'd discovered my voice. But I still needed a story to tell.

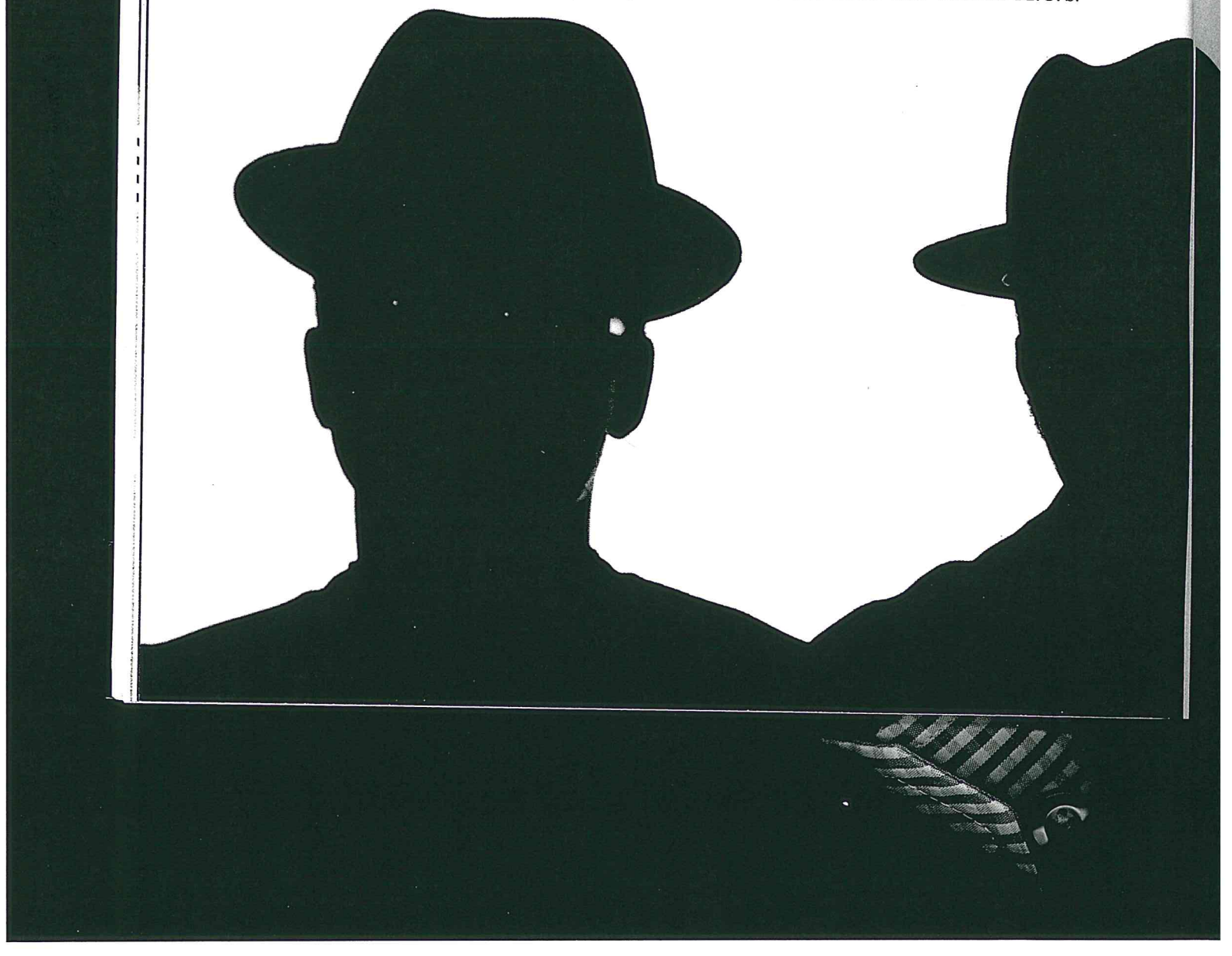
FIRST THE FAT BOYS GONNA BREAK UP

Hip-hop was looking for a narrative, too. By the time the eighties came along, rap was exploding, and I remember the mainstream breakthroughs like they were my own rites of passage. In 1981, the summer before seventh grade, the Funky Four Plus One More performed "That's the Joint" on *Saturday Night Live* and the Rock Steady Crew got on *ABC Nightly News* for battling the Dynamic Rockers at Lincoln Center in a legendary showdown of b-boy dance crews. My parents watched *Soul Train* every Saturday when we cleaned up, but when my big sister Annie and I saw Don Cornelius introduce the Sugar Hill Gang, we just stopped in the middle of the living room with our jaws open. What are *they* doing on TV?

I remember the 12-inch of Run-DMC's "It's Like That" backed with "Sucker M.C.'s" being definitive. That same year, 1983, the year I started high school, Bambaataa released "Looking for the Perfect Beat" and shot a wild-ass video wearing feathered headdresses that they'd play on the local access channel. Annie and I would make up dance routines to those songs, but we didn't take it as far as the costumes. Herbie Hancock's "Rockit" came out that year, too, and those three records were a cultural trifecta. Disco, and even my parents' classic R&B records, all faded into

the background. Everywhere we went there were twelve-pound boom boxes being pulled on skateboards or cars parked on the curb blasting those records. DJ Red Alert debuted his show on Kiss FM and Afrika Islam had a show, "Zulu Beats," on WHBI. The World's Famous Supreme Team did a show you had to catch early in the morning. Kids would make cassettes and bring them to school to play one another the freshest new song from the night before. I'm not gonna say that I thought I could get rich from rap, but I could clearly see that it was gonna get bigger before it went away. Way bigger.

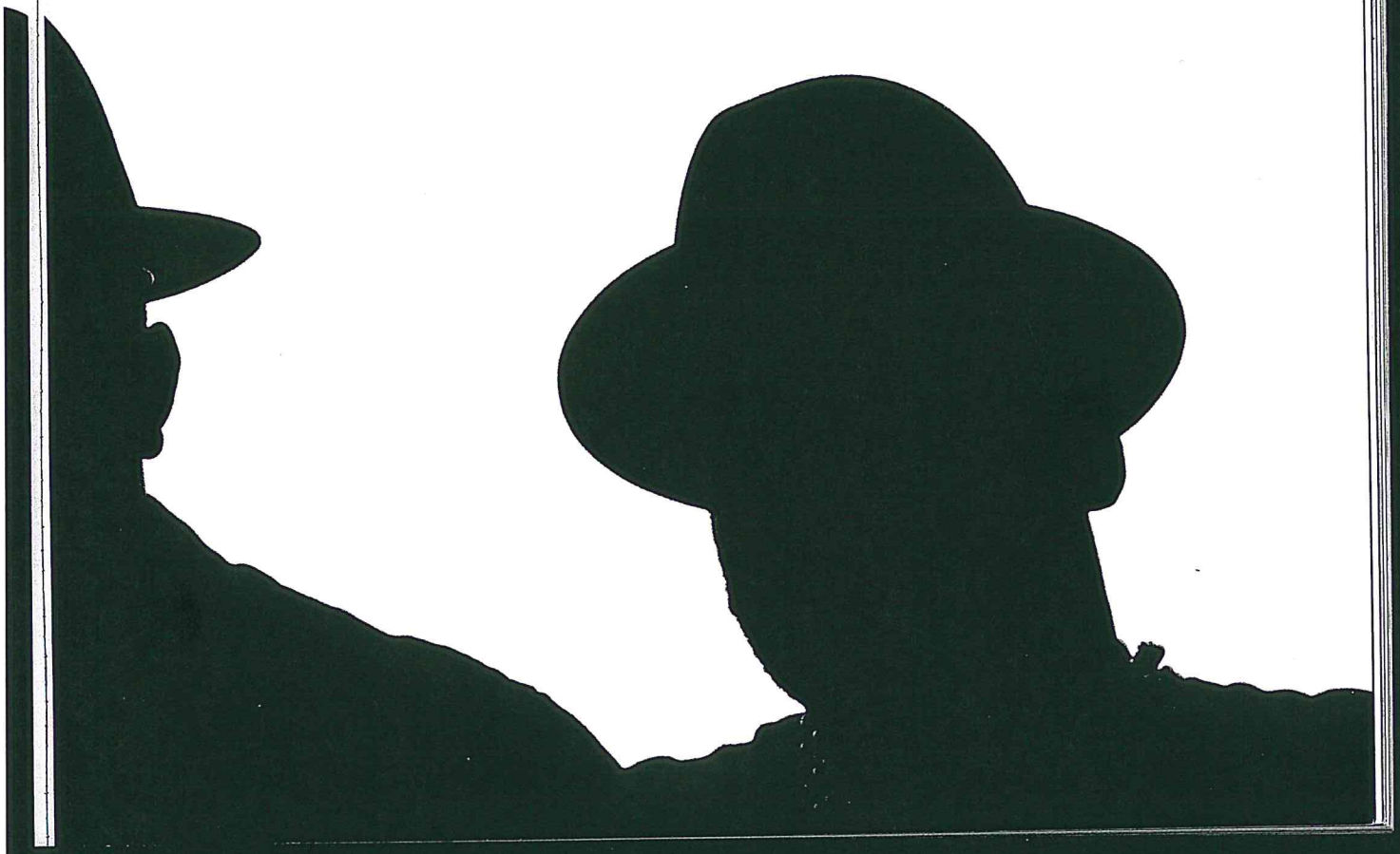
The feeling those records gave me was so profound that it's sometimes surprising to listen to them now. Like those three songs that shook my world back in the early eighties: "Rockit" had complicated-sounding scratching by Grand Mixer DXT, which was big for me because I wanted to be a DJ before I wanted to be a rapper—I would practice scratching at my friend Allen's house on two mismatched turntables mounted on a long piece of plywood. But "Rockit" had no real voice aside from a looping synthetic one. "Looking for the Perfect Beat" was true to its title, obsessed with beats, not lyrical content. Then there was "Sucker M.C.'s."



From the first listen, Run-DMC felt harder than the Sugar Hill Gang or even Kool Moe Dee and other serious battle rappers of the time. Run-DMC's songs were like the hardest rock you'd ever heard stripped to its core chords. Their voices were big, like their beats, but naturally slick, like hustlers'. The rhymes were crisp and aggressive. Run's lyrics described the good life: champagne, caviar, bubble baths. He rapped about having *a big long Caddy, not like a Seville,* a line that seems like a throw-away, but to me felt meaningful—he was being descriptive and precise: Run didn't just say a car, he said a Caddy. He didn't just say a Caddy, he said a Seville. In those few words he painted a picture and then gave it emotional life. I completely related. I was the kid from public housing whose whole hood would rubberneck when an expensive car drove down the block.

Run had the spirit of a battle rapper—funny, observant, charismatic, and confrontational—but his rhymes were more refined. When he passed the mic to his partner, DMC followed with a story told in short strokes that felt completely raw and honest.

It was like he was looking around his hood in Queens—and around



his bedroom, his mom's kitchen—and just calling out what he saw. But the beat and DMC's delivery elevated that humble life into something iconic. *I'm light skinned, I live in Queens / and I love eatin chicken and collard greens.*

With that song hip-hop felt like it was starting to find its style and swagger and point of view: It was going to be raw and aggressive, but also witty and slick. It was going to boast and compete and exaggerate. But it was also going to care enough to get the details right about our aspirations and our crumb-snatching struggles, our specific, small realities (*chicken and collard greens*) and our living-color dreamscapes (*big long Caddy*). It was going to be real. Before Run-DMC, rappers dressed like they were headed to supper clubs for after-dinner drinks, or in full costume. Run-DMC looked like the streets, in denim, leather, and sneakers.

But for all of Run-DMC's style and showmanship, there was something missing in their songs. A story was unfolding on the streets of New York, and around the country, that still hadn't made it into rap, except as an absence. We heard Melle Mel's hit "The Message," with its lyrics about *broken glass everywhere,* and we heard about Run's *big long Caddy,* but what was missing was what was happening in between those two images—how young cats were stepping through the broken glass and into the Caddy.

The missing piece was the story of the hustler.

IF I'M NOT A HUSTLER WHAT YOU CALL THAT?

The story of the rapper and the story of the hustler are like rap itself, two kinds of rhythm working together, having a conversation with each other, doing more together than they could do apart. It's been said that the thing that makes rap special, that makes it different both from pop music and from written poetry, is that it's built around two kinds of rhythm. The first kind of rhythm is the meter. In poetry, the meter is abstract, but in rap, the meter is something you literally hear: it's the beat. The beat in a song never stops, it never varies. No matter what other sounds are on the track, even if it's a Timbaland production with all kinds of offbeat fills and electronics, a rap song is usually built bar by bar, four-beat measure by four-beat measure. It's like time itself, ticking off relentlessly in a rhythm that never varies and never stops.

When you think about it like that, you realize the beat is everywhere, you just have to tap into it. You can bang it out on a project wall or an 808 drum machine or just use your hands. You can beatbox it with your mouth.

But the beat is only one half of a rap song's rhythm. The other is the flow. When a rapper jumps on a beat, he adds his own rhythm. Sometimes you stay in the pocket of the beat and just let the rhymes land on the square so that the beat and flow become one. But sometimes the flow chops up the beat, breaks the beat into smaller units, forces in multiple syllables and repeated sounds and internal rhymes, or hangs a drunken leg over the last *bap* and keeps going, sneaks out of that bitch. The flow isn't like time, it's like life. It's like a heartbeat or the way you breathe, it can jump, speed up, slow down, stop, or pound right through like a machine. If the beat is time, flow is what we do with that time, how we live through it. The beat is everywhere, but every life has to find its own flow.

Just like beats and flows work together, rapping and hustling, for me at least, live through each other. Those early raps were beautiful in their way and a whole generation of us felt represented for the first time when we heard them. But there's a reason the culture evolved beyond that playful, partying lyrical style. Even when we recognized the voices, and recognized the style, and even personally knew the cats who were on the records, the content didn't always reflect the lives we were leading. There was a distance between what was becoming rap's signature style—the relentlessness, the swagger, the complex wordplay—and the substance of the songs. The culture had to go somewhere else to grow.

It had to come home.

CRACK'S IN MY PALM

No one hired a skywriter and announced crack's arrival. But when it landed in your hood, it was a total takeover. Sudden and complete. Like losing your man to gunshots. Or your father walking out the door for good. It was an irreversible new reality. What had been was gone, and in its place was a new way of life that was suddenly everywhere and seemed like it had been there forever.

Cocaine wasn't new and neither was selling it. There had always been older dudes who grew their pinkie fingernails out to sniff coke. There were always down-low dealers who partied with their customers as they supplied them. Melle Mel had a song called "White Lines (Don't Do It)" and of course Kurtis Blow called himself "Blow," but for the most part doing coke was something that happened at private parties, something you might've of heard about but had never really seen. Crackheads were different. They'd smoke in hallways, on playgrounds, on subway station staircases. They got no respect. They were former neighbors, "aunts"

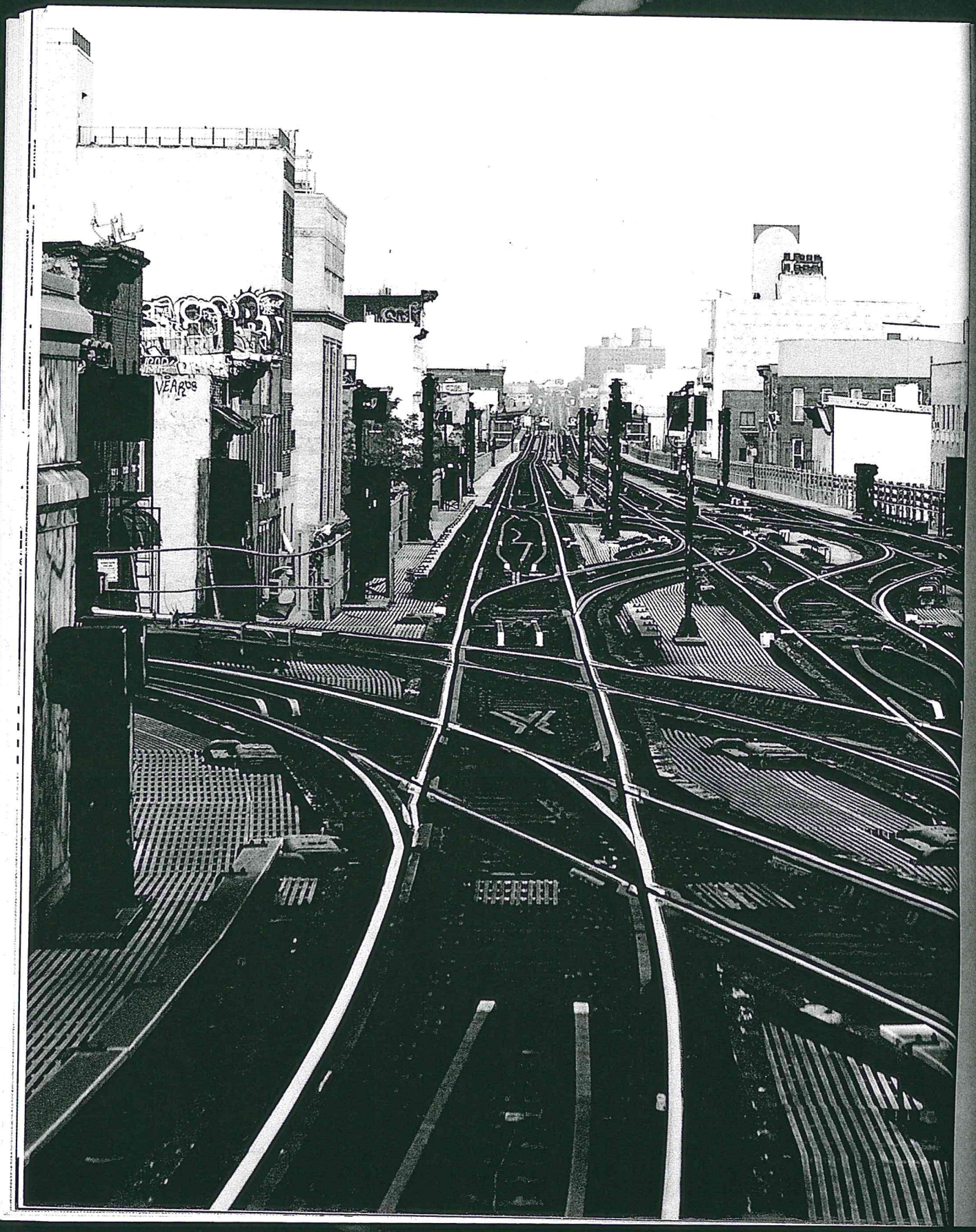
and "uncles," but once they started smoking, they were simply crackheads, the lowest on the food chain in the jungle, worse than prostitutes and almost as bad as snitches.

Most of these fiends were my parents' age or a little younger. They had no secrets. Skeletal and ashy, they were as jittery as rookie beat cops and their eyes were always spinning with schemes to get money for the next hit. Kids my age were serving them. And these new little kamikazes, who simply called themselves hustlers (like generations before us did), were everywhere, stacking their ones. Fuck waiting for the city to pass out summer jobs. I wasn't even a teenager yet and suddenly everyone I knew had pocket money. And better.

When Biggie rhymed about how *things done changed* he could've meant from one summer to the next. It wasn't a generational shift but a generational split. *Look at our parents, they even fukn scared of us.* With that line, Big captured the whole transformation in a few words. Authority was turned upside down. Guys my age, fed up with watching their moms struggle on a single income, were paying utility bills with money from hustling. So how could those same mothers sit them down about a truant report? Outside, in Marcy's courtyards and across the country, teenagers wore automatic weapons like they were sneakers. Broad-daylight shoot-outs had our grandmothers afraid to leave the house, and had neighbors who'd known us since we were toddlers forming Neighborhood Watches against us. There was a separation of style, too. Hip-hop was already moving fashion out of the disco clubs and popularizing rugged streetwear, but we'd take it even further: baggy jeans and puffy coats to stash work and weapons, construction boots to survive cold winter nights working on the streets.

New York wasn't big for gang banging, but every era has its gangs, and during my high school years it was the Decepticons, the Lo-Lifes, even girl gangs like the Deceptinettes. Those broads would just walk up to grown men and punch them in their faces so hard they'd drop. The proliferation of guns on the streets added a different dynamic than the nunchucks, clackers, and kitchen knives kids my older brother's age used to use as weapons in their street fights. The trains were wild. In the early eighties, before I was thirteen, you had graffiti writers tagging trains, knocking conductors out with cans of Krylon if they tried to protect their trains. You had stickup kids looking for jewelry. Forty-fives made it much more likely for you to lose your sheepskin coat—or your life—on the A express. So my friends and I rolled hard for one another.

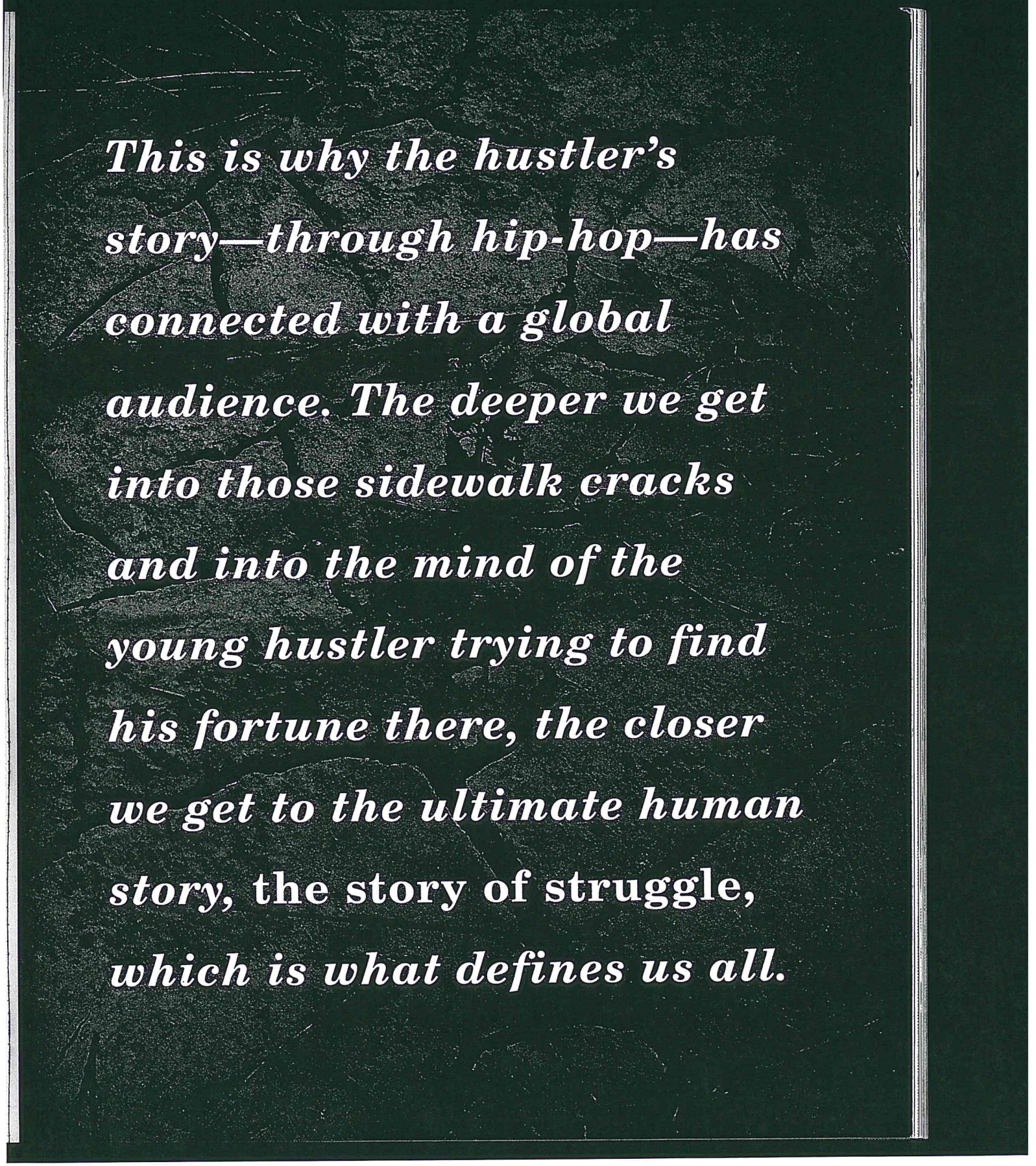
WITH THAT LINE, BIG CAPTURED A SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN A FEW WORDS. AUTHORITY WAS TURNED UPSIDE DOWN.



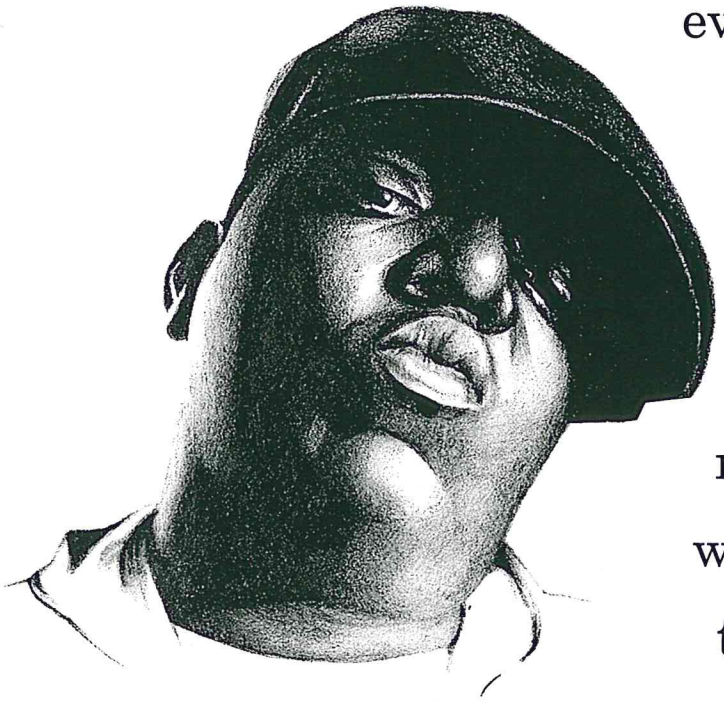
My man Hill (names changed to protect the guilty) and I were close, and even before we got in the game we were living through the changes it brought. I'd ride the train all the way to East New York with him, he'd get off, go see his girl, and I'd ride back to Marcy alone. One time we were on the train heading to Hill's chick's house and these niggas across the aisle just started ice grilling us. We were outnumbered and only had one gun between us, but we grilled them right back. Nothing jumped off and eventually we got off the train. East New York was one of the most serious neighborhoods in the city, so we agreed that he'd hold on to the gun when he decided to spend the night out there. I hit the train alone to head back to Marcy. On the way back, I ran into the same dudes. Unbelievable. I was sitting on the train next to another young guy who just happened to be there when they came through the car. They sat across the aisle from me. They wanted something with me real bad, but they couldn't figure out if the guy sitting next to me was with me. He wasn't. Still, I was looking at them like I'd murder them for staring at me. When the guy next to me got off they grilled at me for a minute. It was on. It wasn't a rare thing to have to fight your way home. Something as meaningless as a glance often ended up in a scuffle—and worse. You could get killed just for riding in the wrong train at the wrong time. I started to think that since I was risking my life anyway, I might as well get paid for it. It was that simple.

YOU COULD GET KILLED JUST FOR RIDING IN THE WRONG TRAIN AT THE WRONG TIME.

One day Hill told me he was selling crack he was getting from a guy named Dee Dee. I told him I wanted to be down and he took me to meet the dude. I remember Dee Dee talking to us in a professional tone, taking his time so we'd really understand him. He explained that hustling was a business but it also had certain obvious, inherent risks, so we had to be disciplined. He knew that, like him, neither of us even smoked weed, so he wasn't worried that we'd get high off of the work, but he wanted to stress how real the game was, that as a hustle it required vision and dedication. We thought we had both. Plus, my friend had a cousin in Trenton, New Jersey, doing the same thing. All we needed were Metroliner tickets to join him. When Dee Dee was murdered, it was like something out of a mob movie. They cut his balls off and stuffed them in his mouth and shot him in the back of the head, execution style. You would think that would be enough to keep two fifteen-year-olds off the turnpike with a pocketful of white tops. But you'd be wrong.


This is why the hustler's story—through hip-hop—has connected with a global audience. The deeper we get into those sidewalk cracks and into the mind of the young hustler trying to find his fortune there, the closer we get to the ultimate human story, **the story of struggle,** *which is what defines us all.*

He elevated it to "the struggle." That's a loaded term. It's usually used to talk about civil rights or black power—*the seat where Rosa Parks sat / where Malcolm X was shot / where Martin Luther was popped*—not the kind of nickel-and-dime, just-to-get-by struggle that Biggie was talking about. Our struggle wasn't organized or even coherent. There were no leaders of this "movement." There wasn't even a list of demands. Our struggle was truly a something-out-of-nothing,



do-or-die situation. The fucked-up thing was that it led some of us to sell drugs on our own blocks and get caught up in the material spoils of that life. It was definitely different, less easily defined, less pure, and harder to celebrate than a simple call for revolution. But in their way, Biggie's words made an even more desperate case for some kind of change. Che was coming from the perspective, "We deserve these rights; we are ready to lead." We were coming from the perspective, "We need some kind of opportunity; we are ready to die." The connections between the two kinds of struggles weren't necessarily clear to me yet, but they were on my mind.