

POEM BOOK

This whole book's a poem 'cause every time I try to
tell the whole story my mind goes *Be quiet!*
Only it's not my mind's voice,
it's Miss Edna's over and over and over
Be quiet! °

I'm not a really loud kid, I swear. I'm just me and
sometimes I maybe make a little bit of noise.
If I was a grown-up maybe Miss Edna
wouldn't always be telling me to be quiet
but I'm eleven and maybe eleven's just noisy.

Maybe twelve's quieter.

But when Miss Edna's voice comes on, the ideas in my
head go out like a candle and all you see left is this little
string of smoke that disappears real quick
before I even have a chance to find out
what it's trying to say.

So this whole book's a poem because poetry's short and
this whole book's a poem 'cause Ms. Marcus says
write it down before it leaves your brain.
I tell her about the smoke and she says
Good, Lonnie, write that.
Not a whole lot of people be saying *Good, Lonnie* to me

so I write the string-of-smoke thing down real fast.
Ms. Marcus says *We'll worry about line breaks later.*

Write fast, Lonnie, Ms. Marcus says.

And I'm thinking Yeah, I better write fast before Miss Edna's voice comes on and blows my candle idea out.

Roof

At night sometimes after Miss Edna goes to bed I go
up on the roof

Sometimes I sit counting the stars

Maybe one is my mama and

another one is my daddy And maybe that's why
sometimes they flicker a bit

I mean *the stars* flicker

LINE BREAK POEM

Ms. Marcus
says
line breaks help
us figure out
what matters
to the poet
Don't jumble your ideas
Ms. Marcus says
*Every line
should count.*

MEMORY

Once when we was real
little
I was sitting at the window holding my baby sister, Lili
on my lap.
Mama was in the kitchen and Daddy must've
been at work.
Mama kept saying
Honey, don't you drop my baby.

A pigeon came flying over to the ledge
and was looking at us.
Lili put her hand on the glass and the pigeon tried
to peck at it.
Lili snatched her hand away and screamed.
Not a scared scream,
just one of those laughing screams
that babies who can't talk yet like to do.

Mama came running out the kitchen
drying her hands on her jeans.
When she saw us just sitting there, she let out a breath.
*Oh, my Lord, she said,
I thought you'd dropped my baby.*
I asked
Was I ever your baby, Mama?
and Mama looked at me all warm and smiley.

You still are, she said.
Then she went back in the kitchen.

I felt safe then.
I held Lili tighter.
Maybe if I was eleven then
and if one of my friends had been around,
I would have been embarrassed, I guess.
But I was just a little kid
and nobody else was around.
Just me and Lili and Mama and the pigeons.
And outside the sun
getting bright and warm suddenly
like it'd been listening in.

Some days, like today
and yesterday and probably
tomorrow—all my missing gets jumbled up inside of me.

You know honeysuckle talc powder?
Mama used to smell like that. She told me
honeysuckle's really a flower but all I know
is the powder that smells like Mama.
Sometimes when the missing gets real bad
I go to the drugstore and before the guard starts
following me around like I'm gonna steal something
I go to the cosmetics lady and ask her if she has it.
When she says yeah, I say
Can I smell it to see if it's the right one?
Even though the cosmetics ladies roll their eyes at me
they let me smell it.
And for those few seconds, Mama's alive
again.
And I'm remembering
all kinds of good things about her like
the way she laughed at my jokes
even when they were dumb
and the way she sometimes just grabbed me
and hugged me before
I had a chance to get away.

And the way her voice always sounded good
and bad at the same time when she was singing
in the shower.

And her red pocketbook that always had some
tangerine Life Savers inside it for me and Lili

No, I say to the cosmetics lady. It's not the right one.
And then I leave fast.

Before somebody asks to check my pockets
which are always empty 'cause I don't steal.

LILI

And sometimes I combed Lili's hair
braids mostly but sometimes a ponytail.
Lili would cry sometimes
the kind of crying where no tears came out.

Big faker.

I wouldn't've hurt her head for a million dollars.

Some days

like today and yesterday and probably tomorrow
that's all that's on my mind

Mama and Lili.

Hair and honeysuckle talc powder.

FIRST

First Miss Edna turned the key and
opened her door for me

and said *This ain't much, but it's all I have.*

A living room, a kitchen with a table and three chairs,
a room with just a bed in it and a poster of Dr. J
when he still played for the Sixers and had an Afro.

You'll sleep in here, she said.

Another room down the hall.

No need for you to ever go in there, she said.

I never did.

All along the living room walls there's pictures
of her sons. Grown-up and gone now.

I used to fill up Miss Edna's house with noise.

I used to talk all the time.

I used to laugh real loud and holler especially
when the Knicks won a game 'cause
that don't happen too much.

Be quiet! Miss Edna said.

Hush, Lonnie, Miss Edna said.

Shhhh, Lonnie, Miss Edna said.

Children should be seen but not heard, Miss Edna said.

And my voice got quieter
and quieter
and quiet.

Now some days Miss Edna looks at me and says

You need to smile more, Lonnie.

You need to laugh sometimes

maybe make a little noise.

*Where's that boy I used to know,
the one who couldn't be quiet?*

COMMERCIAL BREAK

Last night this commercial came on TV. It was this white lady making a nice dinner for her husband. She made him some baked chicken with potatoes and gravy and some kind of greens—not collards, but they still looked real good. Everything looked so delicious, I just wanted to reach into that television and snatch a plate for myself. He gave her a kiss and then a voice came on saying *He'll love you for it* and then the commercial went off.

I sat on Miss Edna's scratchy couch wondering if that man and woman really ate that food or just threw it all away.

Now Ms. Marcus wants to know why I wrote that the lady is white and I say because it's true. And Ms. Marcus says *Lonnie, what does race have to do with it*, forgetting that she asked us to use lots of details when we wrote. Forgetting that whole long talk she gave yesterday about the importance of description! I don't say anything back to her, just look down at my arm. It's dark brown and there's a scab by my wrist that I don't pick at if I remember not to. I look at my knuckles. They're real dark too.

Outside it's starting to rain and the way the rain comes down—tap, tapping against the window—gets me to

thinking. Ms. Marcus don't understand some things even though she's my favorite teacher in the world. Things like my brown, brown arm. And the white lady and man with all that good food to throw away. How if you turn on your TV, that's what you see—people with lots and lots of stuff not having to sit on scratchy couches in Miss Edna's house. And the true fact is alotta those people are white. Maybe it's that if you're white you can't see all the whiteness around you.

HAIKU

Today's a bad day
Is that haiku? Do I look
like I even care?

GROUP HOME BEFORE MISS EDNA'S HOUSE

The monsters that come at night don't
breathe fire, have two heads or long claws.

The monsters that come at night don't
come bloody and half-dead and calling your name.

They come looking like regular boys
going through your drawers and pockets saying
You better not tell Counselor else I'll beat you down.
The monsters that come at night snatch

the covers off your bed, take your
pillow and in the morning

steal your bacon when the cook's back is turned
call themselves The Throwaway Boys, say

You one of us now.

When the relatives stop coming

When you don't know where your sister is anymore
When every sign around you says

Group Home Rules: Don't
do this and don't do that

until it sinks in one rainy Saturday afternoon
while you're sitting at the Group Home window
reading a beat-up Group Home book,
wearing a Group Home hand-me-down shirt
hearing all the Group Home loudness, that
you *are* a Throwaway Boy.

And the news just sits in your stomach
hard and heavy as Group Home food.

HALLOWEEN POEM

It's Halloween

The first-graders put pumpkin pictures and ghost
drawings all up and down the hallways.
We don't do none of that in fifth grade.
We don't want to.

I mean, we're not supposed to want to.

But sometimes

I do.

There's these two guys I know who sometimes snatch
little kids' trick-or-treat bags. That ain't right.

Once when I was a little kid
this big teenager guy snatched mine.

If I'd a had a big brother,
he would've beat the guy down.

But I

don't.

PARENTS
POEM

When people ask how, I say
a fire took them.
And then they look at me like
I'm the most pitiful thing in the world.
So sometimes I just shrug and say
They just died, that's all.

A fire took their bodies.
That's all.

I can still feel their voices and hugs and laughing.
Sometimes.

Sometimes I can hear my daddy
calling my name.
Lonnie sometimes.

And sometimes *Locomotion*
come on over here a minute.
I want to show you something.

And then I see his big hands
holding something out to me.

It used to be the four of us.
At night we went to sleep.
In the morning we woke up and ate breakfast.
Daddy worked for Con Edison.

You ever saw him?
Climbing out of a manhole?
Yellow tape keeping the cars from coming
down the block.

An orange sign that said Men Working.
I still got his hat. It's light blue
with CON EDISON in white letters.

Mama was a receptionist.
When you called the office where she worked,
she answered the phone like this
Graftman Paper Products, how may I help you?
It was her work voice.

And when you said something like
Ma, it's me.

her voice went back to normal. To our mama's voice
Hey Sugar. You behaving? Is the door locked?

That stupid fire couldn't take all of them.
Nothing could do that.

Nothing.

SONNET POEM

Ms. Marcus says mostly sonnets are about love
I think about Mama and Daddy and my sister
how Mama and Daddy are somewhere up above
and Lili's just far away enough for me to miss her.
Ms. Marcus says "sonnet" comes from "sonetto"
and that sonetto means little song or sound
It reminds me of that guy's name—Gepetto
the one who made Pinocchio from wood he found.
Ms. Marcus says you gotta write things a lot of times
before they come out sounding the right way
I know this poem's not about love but at least it rhymes
Maybe I'll get the sonnet thing right one day.
If I had one wish I'd be seven years old again
living on President Street, playing with my friends.

HOW I GOT MY NAME

Whenever that song came on that goes
Come on, baby, do the Locomotion, Mama
would make us dance with her.
We'd do this dance called the Locomotion
when we'd bend our elbows and move
our arms in circles at our sides.
Like our arms were train wheels.
I can see us doing it now—in slow motion.
Mama grinning and singing along
Saying all proud "My kids got rhythm!"
Sometimes Lili got behind me and we'd
do the Locomotion around our little living room. Till
the song ended.
And we fell out on the couch
Laughing. Mama would say
You see why I love that song so much, Lonnie?
See why I had to make it your name?
Lonnie Collins Motion, Mama would say.
Lo Co Motion
Yeah.

DESCRIBE SOMEBODY

Today in class Ms. Marcus said
Take out your poetry notebooks and describe somebody.
Think carefully, Ms. Marcus said.
You're gonna read it to the class.
I wrote, Ms. Marcus is tall and a little bit skinny.
Then I put my pen in my mouth and stared down
at the words.
Then I crossed them out and wrote
Ms. Marcus's hair is long and brown.
Shiny.
When she smiles it makes you feel all good inside.
I stopped writing and looked around the room.
Angel was staring out the window.
Eric and Lamont were having a pen fight.
They don't care about poetry.
Stupid words, Eric says.
Lots and lots of stupid words.
Eric is tall and a little bit mean.
Lamont's just regular.
Angel's kinda chubby. He's got light brown hair.
Sometimes we all hang out,
play a little ball or something. Angel's real good
at science stuff. Once he made a volcano

for science fair and the stuff that came out of it
looked like real lava. Lamont can
draw superheroes real good. Eric—nobody
at school really knows this but
he can sing. Once, Miss Edna took me
to a different church than the one
we usually go to on Sunday.
I was surprised to see Eric up there
with a choir robe on. He gave me a mean look
like I'd better not
say nothing about him and his dark green robe with
gold around the neck.
After the preacher preached
Eric sang a song with nobody else in the choir singing.
Miss Edna started dabbing at her eyes
whispering *Yes, Lord.*
Eric's voice was like something
that didn't seem like it should belong
to Eric.
Seemed like it should be coming out of an angel.

Now I gotta write a whole new poem
'cause Eric would be real mad if I told the class
about his angel voice.

EPISTLE POEM

Hey Pops,

Today our teacher showed us this poem by this poet guy named Langston Hughes. It made me remember something. That long time ago when you read us that good-night poem about that guy who loved his friend. And it made me kinda think that maybe Langston Hughes is the same guy who wrote that one because his name sounded familiar. Underwater familiar—like I dreamed it sort of. I'm not gonna try to explain. I figure you understand. The only thing about what Ms. Marcus read was it wasn't a *poem* poem. She said it's called an epistle poem and it was a letter. I didn't know a letter could be a kind of poem. So now I'm writing one to you to say that even though we can't do stuff like go to the park on our bikes or eat hot dogs from that cart where the guy who always wore the Yankees cap yelled at me for being a Mets fan but gave us a discount if we bought four hot dogs—and we always did—and ate them standing there arguing with him. Even when the Mets lost again and again. I just wanted to say that even though we can't do that kind of stuff no more, I haven't forgot none of it. I'm gonna go see if I can find that poem about that guy loving his friend. I hope it's by Langston Hughes.

—Love, Locomotion

ROOF POEM II

Up here the sky goes on and on like something
you could fall right up into.

And keep falling.

Fall so fast

and so far

and for so long you don't

have to worry about where you're gonna live next,

where you gonna be

if somebody all of a sudden

changes their mind about living with you.

Up here, you could

just let your mind take you

to all kinds of beautiful places

you never been before in real life

Tahiti, Puerto Rico, Spain,

Australia with all those kangaroos hopping around

and then you can come on back

and call the place you come back to

home.

ME, ERIC,
LAMONT
& ANGEL

*Once I saw a house fall down on a lady, Lamont says.
That ain't nothing, Angel says. Once I saw this dog
get hit by a car. He went way up in the air and
when he came down again,
he got up and ran away. But he stopped at the corner,
Angel says.
And died.*

*Eric squints up his eyes.
Looks out over the school yard.
The sky's real blue and no wind's blowing.
I shake my head, trying to shake that dog out of it.
Once I saw a little boy, Eric says, all mysterious.
And then in my dream, he was a man.*

*We all look at him and don't say nothing.
Far away, I hear some girls singing real slow and sad
Her mother, she went upstairs too.
Saying daughter oh daughter
what's troubling you . . .*

*That ain't no tragedy, Angel says, giving Eric a look.
More than what Lonnie seen, Eric says, grinning at me.*

*In my head I see a fire. I see black windows.
I hear people hollering. I smell smoke.
I hear a man's voice saying *I'm so sorry.*
I hear myself screaming:*

Never seen nothing, I say.

tight around his neck

Check

Eric says

Check out his country hat

New boy's holding the hat in his hands

Granddaddy hat in his hands the kind
with the black band going around gray felt

New boy looking like he wish he could
just melt right on outa the room.

DECEMBER 9TH

I wake up with my stomach all bunched, throw up
two times. Miss Edna gives me three Tums,
the spearmint ones
but the stomach pains don't go away and I don't want
breakfast.

Not cereal. Not oatmeal. Not even pancakes.

Miss Edna frowns, presses her hand to my forehead,
fixes

me a bed on the couch.

It's December ninth, she says.

I don't look at her, just go back into the bathroom
Nothing but bitter stuff comes up. And tears.

I hear Miss Edna calling her job saying she won't
be coming in. I hear her say *Dear Lord, remember me.*
I hear her putting water on to boil
and smell the ginger she's chopping up to make me
some tea.

It's been four years, Miss Edna says to the Lord
How long will he carry this burden?

I see my old house on President Street
the window frames black from fire. Glass everywhere.
I hear people screaming and crying.
I see the firemen wearing oxygen masks and shaking
their heads.

FAILING

I got a 39 on my math test
 'cause
I don't understand numbers
 'cause
you say $1 + 1 = 2$ and I go why? You say just
 'cause
like just 'cause somebody said it means it's the truth.
And since I don't believe the things people say is
 always the truth
 'cause
 sometimes people lie
it's hard to understand math.

NEW BOY

New boy comes in our classroom today
Ms. Marcus says
Say good morning, Clyde, and the new boy says
Good mornin', y'all
and the whole class falls out laughing
so hard, Ms. Marcus taps her pointer on the desk,
her face so mad it's purple
R-e-s-p-e-c-t, she says
Respect! we repeat the way
she taught us to—a thousand times ago.

New boy's looking down at the floor
looks real sad, says *I'm sorry, ma'am*
and the class tries hard not to laugh
but some laugh spills out of us anyway.
You've nothing to be sorry about, Ms. Marcus says.

Lamont whispers *He should be sorry he's so country*
Eric says *Look at his country clothes*
New boy knows
they're whispering about him,
puts one foot behind his leg
like he wants to crawl right inside himself.
He's wearing high-water pants, light blue socks,
a white shirt
buttoned all the way up

tight around his neck

Check

Eric says

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and smell the ginger she's chopping up to make me
some tea.

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I see my old house on President Street

the window frames black from fire. Glass everywhere.

I hear people screaming and crying.

I see the firemen wearing oxygen masks and shaking
their heads.

It's cold out. There's water everywhere.
And two of Lili's dolls—burnt and wet on the ground.
I hear Lili screaming for Mama
or maybe it's me.

There's relatives down south who don't have room
for us. There's church people who take us for a while
then pass
us on to more church people until there ain't no more
church people
just group homes where people come sometimes to
bring us food and
toys and read us books they wrote. Then go on home
to their own families.

There used to be four of us
Mama, Daddy, Lili and me. At night we went to sleep.
In the morning we woke up and ate breakfast.
That was four years ago.

I lean my head over the toilet bowl
and more of the bitter stuff comes.

LIST POEM

Blue kicks—Pumas
Blue-and-white Mets shirt
Mets hat
A watch my daddy gave me
Black pants but not dressy—they got side pockets
Ten cornrows with zigzag parts like Sprewell's
A gold chain with a cross on it from Mama—under
my shirt
White socks *clean*
One white undershirt *clean*
White underwear *clean*
A dollar seventy-five left pocket
Two black pens
A little notebook right pocket
All my teeth inside my mouth
One little bit crooked front one
Brown eyes
A little mole by my lip
Lotion on so I don't look ashy
Three keys to Miss Edna's house back pocket
Some words I wanted to remember
written on my right hand
Leftie
Lonnie

LATE SATURDAY
AFTERNOON IN
HALSEY STREET
PARK

Shoot hoops with me, Dog
Eric says. Throws me the ball.
Where you been all day?

PIGEON

People all the time talking about how much they hate pigeons 'cause pigeons fly by and crap on their heads and then somebody always says *That's good luck! That's good luck!* so you don't feel all stupid going through your pockets tryna find a tissue to wipe it off and you never find one 'cause you don't be carrying tissues like an old lady so you gotta walk up to some old lady with that pigeon crap on your head and ask her for a tissue and she just goes *Don't worry, that's good luck* like everybody else and it makes you hate those sky roaches 'cause they're everywhere in the city so you better duck if they fly over your head or else

But

This guy Todd that lives next door to Miss Edna's building got a pigeon coop on his roof and sometimes I go up there and watch Todd waving this huge white sheet till all the pigeons come swooping and flying above us—back and forth and up and down making those croaky pigeon sounds. Those days I'm not scared about pigeon crap on my head because the way they fly—just slow back and forth and the sun getting all bright orange behind them and them making those sounds that after a while sound a little bit like a song—all of it together makes you look up into the sky and believe in everything