

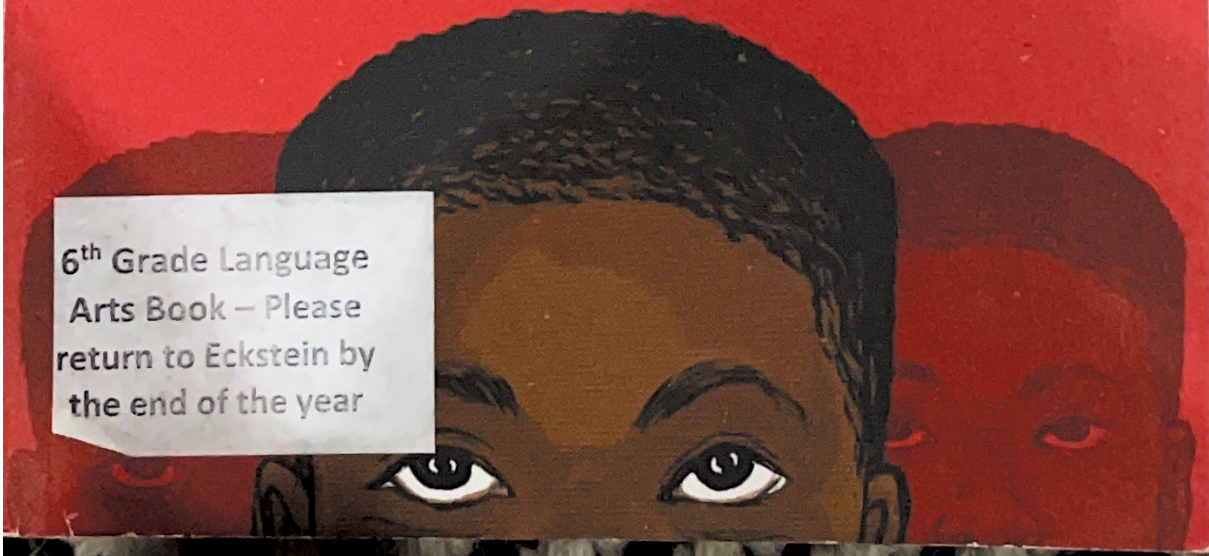
A *New York Times* bestseller

Jewell Parker Rhodes

GHOST BOYS

The background of the cover is a solid, vibrant red. Overlaid on this are several black silhouettes of traffic light poles and traffic lights. The poles are angled across the frame, with some lights hanging vertically and others horizontally. The lights themselves are depicted as black rectangles with three circular lenses, the top one of which is colored orange. The overall style is graphic and urban.

6th Grade Language
Arts Book – Please
return to Eckstein by
the end of the year



*Dedicated to the belief that we can
all do better, be better, live better.
We owe our best to each
and every child.*



DEAD

How small I look. Laid out flat, my stomach touching ground. My right knee bent and my brand-new Nikes stained with blood.

I stoop and stare at my face, my right cheek flattened on concrete. My eyes are wide open. My mouth, too.


I'm dead.

I thought I was bigger. Tough. But I'm just a bit of nothing.

My arms are outstretched like I was trying to fly like Superman.

I'd barely turned, sprinting. *Pow, pow*. Two bullets. Legs gave way. I fell flat. Hard.

I hit snowy ground.



Ma's running. She's wailing, "My boy. My boy." A policeman holds her back. Another policeman is standing over me, murmuring, "It's a kid. It's a kid."

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Ma's struggling. She gasps like she can't breathe; she falls to her knees and screams.

I can't bear the sound.

Sirens wail. Other cops are coming. Did someone call an ambulance?

I'm still dead. Alone on the field. The policeman closest to me is rubbing his head. In his hand, his gun dangles. The other policeman is watching Ma like she's going to hurt someone. Then, he shouts, "Stay back!"

People are edging closer, snapping pictures, taking video with their phones. "Stay back!" The policeman's hand covers his holster.

More people come. Some shout. I hear my name. "Jerome. It's Jerome." Still, everyone stays back. Some curse; some cry.

Doesn't seem fair. Nobody ever paid me any attention. I skated by. Kept my head low.

Now I'm famous.

Chicago Tribune
OFFICER: "I HAD NO CHOICE!"

Jerome Rogers, 12, shot at abandoned Green Street lot. Officer says, "He had a gun."

ALIVE

December 8

Morning

"Come straight home. You hear me, Jerome? Come straight home."

"I will." I always do.

Ma leans down, hugs me. Grandma slides another stack of pancakes on my plate. "Promise?"

"Promise." Same ritual every day.

I stuff a pancake into my mouth. Kim sticks out her tongue.

I'm the good kid. Wish I wasn't. I've got troubles but I don't get *in* trouble. Big difference.

I'm pudgy, easily teased. But when I'm a grown-up, everybody's going to be my friend. I might even be president. Like Obama.

Kim says she believes me. That's why I put up with her.

She can be annoying. Asking too many questions.

Like: "What makes a cloud?" "Why're their shapes different?" Telling me: "*Minecraft* is stupid." Begging me to help pick out a library book.

"Hurry up. Else you'll be late," says Grandma. She hands Ma a lunch sack. At school, me and Kim get free lunch.

Everybody works in our house. Ma is a receptionist at Holiday Inn. Her shift starts at eight a.m.

Me and Kim's job, says Ma, is going to school.

Pop leaves the house at four a.m. He's a sanitation officer. He drives a truck. In the old days, there was a driver and two men hanging off the truck's sides, leaping down to lift and dump smelly trash cans. Now steel arms pick up bins. Pop does the whole route by himself. He stays in the air-conditioned cabin, steering, pressing the button for the mechanical arm, and listening to Motown. The Temptations. Smokey Robinson. The Supremes. Sixties pop music. Lame. Hip-hop is better.

Grandma keeps house. She cooks, cleans. Makes it so me and Kim aren't home alone. Have snacks. Homework help (though I prefer playing video games).

GHOST BOYS

"After school is troublesome," says Ma.

Pushing back my chair, I kiss her.

"Come straight home," Ma repeats, tucking in her white uniform shirt.

Grandma hugs, squeezes me like I'm a balloon. She pecks my cheek. "I'm worried about you. Been having bad dreams."

"Don't worry." That's my other job—comforting Ma and Grandma. Grandma worries the most. She has dreams. "Premonitions," she calls them. Worries about bad things happening. But I don't know what, where, when, or why.

"Sometimes I dream lightning strikes. Or earthquakes. Sometimes it's dark clouds mushrooming in the sky. I wake troubled."

Remembering her words, I worry. I know Ma will remind her to take her blood pressure pill.

Pop worries, too, but he usually doesn't say so. Early morning, before he leaves for work, he always stops by my room. (Kim's, too.)

He opens the door; there's a shaft of hallway light. I've gotten used to it. Eyes closed, I pretend to

be asleep. Pop looks and looks, then softly closes the door and goes to work.

"Jerome?" Grandma clasps my shoulder. "Tell me three good things."

I pause. Grandma is truly upset. Half-moon shadows rim her eyes.

"Three, Jerome. Please."

Three. Grandma's special number. "Three means 'All.' Optimism. Joy," Grandma says every day. "Heaven, Earth, Water. Three means you're close to the angels."

I lick my lip. "One, school is fun." Hold up two fingers. "I like it when it snows." Then, "Three, when I'm grown, I'm going to have a cat." (A dog, too. But I don't say that. A dog would be *four* good things. Can't ruin the magical three.)

Grandma exhales. I've said exactly what she needed to hear. *Fine*, I've told her. *I'm fine*.

I stuff my books into my bag. I wink, wave bye to Ma.

"Study hard," she says, both smiling and frowning.

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She's happy I comforted Grandma, but unhappy with Grandma's southern ways.

Ma wants me and Kim to be "ED—YOU—CATED." She pokes her finger at us when she says "YOU."

"ED—YOU"—poke—"CATED, Jerome." Sometimes the poke hurts a bit. But I get it.

Grandma dropped out of elementary school to care for her younger sisters. Ma and Pop finished high school. Me and Kim are supposed to go to college.

Kim is by the front door, backpack slung over her shoulder. Kim's nice. But I don't tell her that. She's bony, all elbows and knees. When she's a teenager, I'll be grown. Everybody will worry more about her than me.

Ma always says, "In this neighborhood, getting a child to adulthood is perilous."

I looked up the word. *Perilous*. "Risky, dangerous."

I pull Kim's braid. Frowning, she swats my hand.

Can't be good all the time.

Later, I'll take my allowance and buy Kim a book. Something scary, fun.

We walk to school. Not too fast like we're running; not too slow like we're daring someone to stop us. Our walk has got to be just right.

Green Street isn't peaceful; it isn't green either. Just brick houses, some lived in, some abandoned. Out-of-work men play cards on the street, drinking beer from cans tucked in paper bags.

Eight blocks to travel between home and school.

On the fifth block from our house is Green Acres. A meth lab exploded there and two houses burnt. Neighbors tried to clear the debris, make a basketball court. It's pathetic. A hoop without a net. Spray-painted lines. Planks of wood hammered into sad bleachers. At least somebody tried.

Two blocks from school, drug dealers slip powder or pill packets to customers, stuffing cash into their pockets. Pop says, "Not enough jobs, but still, it's wrong. Drugs kill." Me and Kim cross the street,

away from the dealers. They're not the worst, though. School bullies are the worst. Bullies never leave you alone. Most days I try to stay near adults. Lunchtime I hide in the locker room, the supply closet, or the bathroom.

Kim slips her hand in mine. She knows.

"I'll meet you after school," I say.

"You always do." She squeezes my palm. "You going to have a good day?"

"Yeah," I say, trying to smile, searching the sidewalks for Eddie, Snap, and Mike. They like to dump my backpack. Push me, pull my pants down. Hit me upside the head.

Kim clenches her hand, purses her lips. She's smart for a third grader. She knows surviving the school day isn't easy for me.

She never tells.

Ma, Pop, and Grandma have enough to worry about. They know Kim's popular and I'm not. But they don't need to know I'm being bullied.

"Kimmeee!" a girl shouts.

Kim flashes me a grin. I nod. Then she skips up

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the school steps, her braids bouncing as she and Keisha chatter-giggle, crossing left into the elementary school. Middle school is to the right.

"Yo, Jerome."

I look over my shoulder, hugging my backpack closer. Mike's grinning. Eddie and Snap, fists clenched, thug-posing, stand by his side. Damn. Have to be super careful.

During lunch, I'll hide in the bathroom. Maybe they'll forget about me? Find another target?

I can hope.

Just like I hope I'll win the lottery. A million dollars.

DEAD

GHOST

The apartment is packed. Ma's sisters, Uncle Manny, my cousins. Reverend Thornton. The kitchen table is covered with food—my favorites, potato salad, lemon meringue pie, pork chops. If everyone wasn't so sad-faced, I'd swear it was a party.

I reach for a cornbread square and my hand passes through it. Weird, but it's okay. I'm not hungry. I guess I'll never be hungry again.

I move, circling the living room.

People don't pass through me. It's like they sense I'm taking up space. Even though they can't see me, they shift, lean away. I'm glad about that. It's enough being dead without folks entering and leaving me like in *Ghostbusters*.

* * *

Ma is in my bedroom, lying on my bed with orange basketball sheets. A poster of Stephen Curry shooting a ball is taped on the wall.

Ma's eyes are swollen. Grandma holds her hand like she's a little girl.

I don't feel much—like I'm air touching the furniture or Ma's hand. Maybe that's what happens when you're dead? But seeing Ma crying makes me want to crush, slam something into the ground. *Inside me hurts; outside me feels nothing.* I try to touch her—*nothing*—just like the cornbread. Ma shivers and it makes me sad that I can't comfort her.

I turn toward the doorway. Kim is reading a book. She does that when gunshots are fired outside, when our upstairs neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Lyon, are fighting, yelling. For now, I know she's okay. Reading makes her feel better.

I stand in the doorway, shocked how my room is filled with family, how it isn't my room anymore. Isn't my place where I imagine, dream I'm playing college ball. Or in the army, diving out of airplanes. Or rapping on the radio. Or being president.

GHOST BOYS

* * *

To my right, Pop leans into the corner. Like he wants to collapse into the space and disappear. His eyes are closed and his arms are folded across his chest. Who will he shoot hoops with? Or eat hot dogs with while cheering the Chicago Bears?

"I'm here. I'm still here," I rasp.

Ma, on my bed, curls on her side; Pop's lips tighten. Grandma looks up, searching.

"I'm still here, Grandma."

Her face is a wrinkled mess. I didn't realize it before, but Grandma is really old. She looks up and through me. Her eyes glimmer; she nods. *Does she see? Does she see me?*

Reverend Thornton moves past me. He doesn't realize he's tucking his stomach in and entering the room sideways. Grandma notices. Nobody else thinks it's strange.

"We should pray," he says.

"What for?" asks Pop. "Jerome's not coming back."

Ma gasps, sits up. "James. We don't know God's will."

"It's man's will—it's a policeman acting a fool."

Murdering my boy." Pop's fist slams the wall. The dry-wall cracks. I've never seen Pop violent.

"He's in a better place," says Reverend. "Jerome's in a better place."

Am I?

Ma rocks, her arms crossed over her stomach.

"Every goodbye ain't gone," says Grandma.

"Mom, hush with that nonsense," complains Ma.

"Every black person in the South knows it's true. Dead, living, no matter. Both worlds are close. Spirits aren't gone."

"Superstition," scoffs Reverend. "This is Chicago. Jerome's soul is already gone."

I kneel. "I'm still here, Ma. I'm still here."

"We'll bury him tomorrow," cries Ma and I want to cry, too, though my eyes don't make tears anymore.

"Sue, I'm going to sue," says Pop. "No sense why my boy's dead and those white men are walking around alive. Free."

"Emmett. Just like Emmett Till," says Grandma. "He was a Chicago boy, too."

"This isn't 1955," says Reverend, calming.

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"Tamir Rice, then," shouts Pop. "2014. He died in Cleveland. Another boy shot just because he's black."

Grandma looks at the space where I'm standing. Her head is cocked sideways; she's breathing soft.

"No justice. No peace," says Pop. "Since slavery, white men been killing blacks." Then, he starts to cry. Ma hugs him and they hold tight to each other like they're both going to drown.

My heart shatters. Nothing hurt this much, not even the bullets searing my back.

My alarm clock clicks: 12:00 a.m. Nine hours ago I was playing in Green Acres.

Now it's a new day. I'm here but not here.

Where's my body? Where do they keep it until it's laid in the ground?

"Time to wake up."

I spin around. Who said that?

I leave the bedroom, wandering through the apartment, past eating, crying, praying people, searching for who spoke to me.

In the kitchen, by the window, I see a brown boy like me. His eyes are black velvet. He's tall as me; his hair, short like mine. He stares and stares as if the world has made him so sorry, so sad.

Scared, I step backwards. He nods, like he expected it; then, disappears.

He's not in the kitchen. My hands pass through the glass pane. I see the starry night sky, the darkened road, streetlamps attracting bugs.

Across the street, I see him. Wispy like soft rain. A ghost?

Like me?

It's awful sp
angry and r
my bed. Or

I can't sl

I watch
Ma seems
the apart
always sh
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watching

At ni
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Too sad
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