

Mama

By Jacqueline Woodson

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.