**Ninth Ward** by Jewell Parker Rhodes

*This is an excerpt from the book Ninth Ward, written by Jewell Parker Rhodes and published in 2010. The narrative voice belongs to Lanesha, a 12-year-old girl growing up in New Orleans. Lanesha is frequently picked on and teased because she has a special gift—she is able to see ghosts and spirits. Lanesha is used to being bullied herself, but in this scene she is a witness to someone else being the target.*

I hear cursing, and crying.

            “Hey,” I shout. Some boys are dragging someone into the alley. Taunting, kicking. Punching.

            A dog barks.

            I hear: “Stop it.”

            I hate bullies.

            “Hey.” I push at one boy. He turns, but when he sees it’s me, he doesn’t hit. I am Mama Ya-Ya’s crazy girl.

            “What y’all doing?” I know these boys—Eddie, Max, Lavon.

            “Mind your own business,” says Max. He puffs out his chest, acting tough. He has always been a thug. I go toe-to-toe. I puff my chest out, too. I still don’t see who they’ve been picking on. I keep my eyes focused on Max.

            “You want to fight me,” I say. No boy likes to be dared by a girl. If he takes me up on it, I’m dead. I hear crying and I know whoever they’ve been picking on is gonna be no help.

            “Why would I fight a girl? Waste of time.”

            “Yeah,” says Eddie. Max scowls at him to shut up.

            Max hasn’t moved and his black eyes look me over. “Go home, Lanesha,” Max says. “It ain’t Halloween.”

            Eddie and Lavon coo, cackle with laughter. Max is giving high fives.

            “Your momma,” I say. Everyone goes quiet. Max looks fierce. Like he wants to punch me.

            “Say it,” I say. Max is supposed to say, “Your momma,” back. But no one messes with Mama Ya-Ya. She may cast a spell on him. Of course, she’d do no such thing. She doesn’t do spells. Wouldn’t hurt a bug. But Max doesn’t know that.

            “You have skinny legs, skinny butt, skinny everything,” he says. “No wonder no boy likes you. You ugly.” He stretches out *uhhh-glee* like a moan. I don’t mind; it’s part of the game. Max keeps a little pride, and I get what I want.

            I turn my back and look to see who’s been picked on. TaShon! His eye is swollen and he has his arms wrapped about a dirty dog.

            “Go on,” I say to Max, Eddie, and Lavon. “Pick on someone else.”

            “They was kicking the dog,” screams TaShon. “Dog didn’t hurt nobody.”

            Kids, at school, whisper Max once set a cat on fire.

            “You’re just a girl. Not worth my time.”

            I ball my fist. “And you’re just stupid, dumber than a rock.” I want Max to fight me.

            “Go on, hit her,” says Lavon.

            “Yeah,” says Eddie, his eyes bugging out like a balloon.

            Max blinks. His eyes are superblack. Mean.

            “Come on,” Max says. “Waste of time.” Him, Eddie, and Lavon walk away, trying to be cool.

            I can finally breathe.

            “Thanks,” says TaShon. He pats the dog and the dog licks him. It’s the first time I’ve seen TaShon smile. A big wide smile that shows his teeth!