

# 20190614\_theslowdown\_20190614\_128

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

poem, earl, familiar, pawns, nimbly, stands, loveseat, teach, samuel johnson, mighty, north philadelphia, kid, sags, bus stop, yugoslavia, ballets, long, hidden truths, eyes, hunching

00:05

I'm Tracy k Smith, and this is the slow down

00:19

18th century writer Samuel Johnson famously said, the two most engaging powers of an author are to make new things familiar and familiar things new. It's a quote I often resort to, in describing what's special about poems, and why they delight me. poems teach us to see everyday things through new and keen eyes, they tease out the unexpected possibilities that sit beneath the worlds many familiar surfaces. They reveal the surprises, and hidden truths that pass us by simply because of our distraction or attention, or because we usually only see what we expect to see. And poems bring us into intimate proximity with ideas, objects, people and places we may never before have encountered. They teach us to wait out the Panic of not knowing instantly what is what. Sometimes, that process of acclamation feels like waiting for your eyes to adjust in the dark, then suddenly, you can make sense of where you are, and what lies before you. Today's poem, mighty pawns, by major Jackson, reminds me that poems can be a powerful impetus to rethink our assumptions about what appears strange or familiar in other people. It paints a portrait of a tough kid, you might think you recognize nimbly teaching you to see the many features of his life, until it becomes plain that the central character of the poem, Earl, is unlike anyone else you'll ever meet. Perhaps the larger work of the poem is to remind you that everybody is unlike anyone else you'll ever meet. Oh, one other thing about mighty pawns. It's one nearly ceaseless sentence long, like it's racing to introduce you properly to Earl, before your mind about him gets made up. Mighty pawns by major Jackson. If I told you Earl, the toughest kid on my block in North Philadelphia, bow legged and ominous, could beat any man or woman in 10 moves playing white, or that he traveled to Yugoslavia to frustrate the bearded masters at the Belgrade chess Association, you'd think I was given to hyperbole. And if at dinner time, I took you into the faint

light of his section eight home, reeking of onions, liver and gravy, his six little brothers fighting on a broken loveseat for room in front of a cracked flat screen, one whose diaper sags it's a wonder it hasn't fallen to his ankles, the walls behind doors, exposing sheetrock, the perfect Oh, have a handle and the slats of stairs missing were a baby boy gets stuck trying to ascend to a Dominion foreign to you and me with it's loud Tim ballets and drums blasting down from the closed room of his cousin, whose mother stands on a corner on the other side of town all times of day and night, except when her relief check arrives at the beginning of the month, you'd get a better picture of Earl's ferocity after school on the board and Mr. Sherman's class, but not necessarily when he stands near you at a downtown bus stop and a jacket a size too small, hunching his shoulders around his ears. As you imagine the checkered squares of his poverty and anger and pray he does not turn his precise gaze too long in your direction. For fear he blames you and proceeds to take your queen. The slow down is a production of American Public Media, in partnership with the Library of Congress and the Poetry Foundation. To get a poem delivered to you daily go to [slowdownshow.org](http://slowdownshow.org)