

Dreaming Black Boy

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I wish my teacher's eyes wouldn't
go past me today. Wish he'd know
it's okay to hug me when I kick
a goal.

Analysis: The poem opens mid-thought, with an intimacy that places the reader directly inside the boy's inner world. His first wish is devastatingly small: simply to be seen by his teacher. The teacher's eyes that "go past" him suggest the casual, everyday invisibility that racism imposes: not violence, but erasure. The wish for a hug after scoring a goal is a child's basic need for acknowledgement and warmth, made painful by its absence. The repetition of "wish", which recurs twelve times across the poem, is established here as the poem's governing device, accumulating into a portrait of sustained, quiet longing.

Wish I myself wouldn't hold back when answer comes.

Analysis: The persona admits his own self-suppression. He knows the answer, but holds back. Years of being overlooked and dismissed have eroded his confidence to the point where even his own voice feels dangerous. This is the psychological damage of racism: it does not only come from outside, but takes root within.

I'm no woodchopper now
like all ancestors.

Analysis: The allusion to his ancestors as woodchoppers references the legacy of slavery and colonial labour: a life of physical servitude with no intellectual freedom. He knows he is no longer enslaved in that literal sense, yet the poem's unfolding reveals how much of that constraint still shapes his world. The line carries both pride and painful awareness.

I wish I could be educated
to the best of tune up,

Analysis: The metaphor "best of tune up" compares education to the fine-tuning of an instrument or an engine, brought to its highest possible performance. He does not wish for basic schooling but for excellence, for the full realisation of his potential. This wish implies that access to that level of education is being denied to him.

and earn
good money and not sink to lick
boots.

Analysis: "Lick boots" carries three layers of meaning. Most literally, it references boot-shining: a demeaning, low-paid job historically assigned to the poorest Black people, cleaning the shoes of white people with their own saliva. More broadly, it refers to any subservient, menial labour that demands submission just to survive. And at its deepest level, a "bootlicker" is a person with no self-confidence, always trying to

please others, who has surrendered all pride. The persona refuses all three. "Sink" is deliberate: it suggests downward pressure, a drowning rather than a choice.

I wish I could go on every
crisscross way of the globe
and no persons or powers or
hotel keepers would make it a waste.

Analysis: "Crisscross way of the globe" evokes the freedom of unrestricted movement: travel in every direction, to every corner of the world. The listing of "persons or powers or hotel keepers" escalates from individual prejudice to institutional discrimination to the everyday racism of being turned away from accommodation. All three conspire to make his presence in the world feel unwelcome, a "waste."

I wish life wouldn't spend me out
opposing.

Analysis: The personification of "life" as something that "spends" him out frames existence itself as an exhausting transaction. To be "spent out" is to be drained completely, his energy consumed not by living but by constant resistance. He is tired not of ambition but of having to fight for the right to have it.

Wish same way creation
would have me stand it would have
me stretch, and hold high, my voice
Paul Robeson's, my inside eye
a sun.

Analysis: This is the poem's most aspirational moment. The personification of "creation" presents it as a force that has given him resilience, the ability to "stand," but he wants it also to give him room to "stretch," to grow beyond what survival demands. The allusion to Paul Robeson, the African American singer, actor, lawyer, athlete, and civil rights activist, represents the fullest possible expression of Black achievement. Robeson was his class valedictorian, graduated law school while simultaneously playing professional football in the NFL, performed on concert stages worldwide, and became an unstoppable voice for civil rights. He accomplished more in multiple fields than most people achieve in one. The persona wants that voice: deep, commanding, impossible to ignore. "My inside eye a sun" is a striking metaphor: he wants his inner intelligence and spirit to radiate outward like sunlight, brilliant, warm, and undeniable.

Nobody wants to say
hello to nasty answers.

Analysis: A quietly devastating observation. Even if he raises his hand, even if he speaks with Robeson's authority, the world may still reject what he has to offer simply because of who he is. Excellence does not guarantee acceptance. This line tempers the aspiration of the previous lines with the cold reality of prejudice.

I wish torch throwers of night
would burn lights for decent times.
Wish plotters in pyjamas would pray
for themselves.

Analysis: The allusion to the Ku Klux Klan is veiled but unmistakable. "Torch throwers of night" references the burning crosses the KKK used in their night-time terrorising of Black communities. "Plotters in pyjamas" mocks their white robes, which resemble pyjamas, while "pray for themselves" exposes their hypocrisy: they committed acts of extreme violence while claiming a Christian identity. The persona's wish here is not for revenge but for them to simply stop: to turn their burning and plotting inward, toward their own moral reckoning.

Wish people wouldn't
talk as if I dropped from Mars.

Analysis: The simile "as if I dropped from Mars" captures the alienation of being treated as foreign, strange, and inherently out of place: not just in a country, but on the planet itself. He is made to feel as though his very existence requires explanation.

I wish only boys were scared
behind bravados, for I could suffer.

Analysis: The persona had hoped that fear and pretended bravery were things of childhood, that adults would be genuinely courageous and capable of protecting him. But he has learned that adults too hide behind facades. The word "bravados" (plural) suggests many people performing courage they do not feel. He is alone.

I could suffer a big big lot.

Analysis: The repetition of "big" and the simplicity of the language here is deliberate. "Big big" echoes a child's way of speaking, emphasising enormity without elaborate vocabulary. This regression to childlike language makes the statement more raw and affecting, not less.

I wish nobody would want to earn
the terrible burden I can suffer.

Analysis: The poem closes not with anger but with empathy. He does not wish his suffering on anyone, not even those who have caused it. "Earn" is a striking word: suffering is not something that should be worked toward or deserved. The word "burden" frames his racial identity not as something shameful but as a weight unjustly placed upon him by society. His final wish is the most selfless of all: that no one else should have to carry what he carries.

About the poem

Author: James Berry (1924–2017)

Context: Jamaican-British poet; Berry wrote extensively about the Black experience in Britain and the Caribbean. This poem reflects on the systemic racism, invisibility, and constrained aspirations faced by young Black people

Core idea: Through a series of twelve wishes, a young Black boy reveals the full weight of racism's daily toll, not through dramatic violence, but through the quiet denial of recognition, opportunity, freedom, and dignity.

- **Main themes**

- Racism and racial discrimination
- Oppression and survival
- Desire, dreams, and aspiration
- Childhood experiences and loss of innocence
- Identity and self-worth
- **Mood:** Sad, wistful, and quietly desperate; tender rather than angry
- **Tone:** Yearning and subdued; the persona is reflective rather than defiant, though restrained anger surfaces throughout

Remember

- "I wish" / "Wish" appears **twelve times**: this **repetition** is the poem's structural backbone; each wish reveals another dimension of what racism withholds
- The poem moves from **the personal and immediate** (a teacher's glance, a hug after a goal) **'the aspirational** (education, travel, Paul Robeson) **'the systemic and terrifying** (KKK) **'the deeply empathetic** (wishing no one else suffers as he does)
- The **allusions** are all exam-critical: ancestors/woodchoppers (slavery), Paul Robeson (Black excellence as aspiration), KKK (systemic racial terror)
- "Hold back when answer comes" is the poem's quietest but most powerful image of internalised oppression: racism has made him silence himself
- The **language simplifies** in the final stanza ("big big lot"): this is not weakness but rawness; childlike language strips away all artifice
- The final wish is **outward, not inward**: he does not wish for his own escape but for no one else to suffer. This is the poem's moral climax