

The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son

Her son was first made known to her
as a sense of unease, a need to cry
for little reasons and a metallic tide
rising in her mouth each morning.

Analysis: The title establishes this immediately as a monologue, not a dialogue. The woman speaks to the man, not with him. He is either absent, not listening, or she may be imagining the confrontation. The word "employed" deserves scrutiny: it could be read with bitterness or as a possible reference to the man being a gang leader, soldier, or officer who has recruited her son into violence. "Employed" makes it sound legitimate and official, which is part of the poem's accusatory irony.

The metaphor "metallic tide rising in her mouth" represents morning sickness but does more than describe pregnancy. The metallic taste is a foreshadowing: metal returns later as a submachine gun. From the very beginning of the child's life, the language points toward weapons and death.

Such signs made her know
That she was not alone in her body.

Analysis: "Made known to her" carries a prophetic register, as though her son was announced to her the way an angel might announce a birth of significance. He is presented as a child of destiny from the very beginning, which makes the violence that awaits him all the more devastating.

She carried him full term
tight up under her heart.

Analysis: The metaphor "tight up under her heart" emphasizes both physical closeness and emotional attachment. Despite the unplanned nature, she develops deep love and commitment to the child.

She carried him like the poor
carry hope, hope you get a break
or a visa, hope one child go through
and remember you.

Analysis: The simile "like the poor carry hope" is among the poem's most precise images. The poor do not carry hope lightly or casually; they carry it desperately, as the one thing they have left, a visa, a chance, a way out. It is simultaneously joyful and fragile. The repetition of "hope", "hope you get a break, a visa, hope

one child go through", shows how the poor stack hope upon hope, because the odds are so against them that each one alone feels insufficient.

He had no father.

The man she made him with had more
like him, he was fair-minded
he treated all his children
with equal and unbiased indifference.

Analysis: The phrase "equal and unbiased indifference" is sardonic irony: the language of fairness and impartiality applied to abandonment. The father treats all his children the same: equally, unbiasedly, with total indifference. By using the formal vocabulary of justice to describe neglect, the poem exposes how language can be weaponised to make failure sound like virtue. The father is reduced to a biological contributor rather than a caregiver.

She raise him twice, once as mother
Then as father, set no ceiling
On what he could be doctor,
earth healer, pilot take wings.

Analysis: The metaphor "set no ceiling" conveys limitless potential. "Raise" is also a pun: she raised him as a parent, but also raised him upward, lifted him, elevated him. "Take wings" is a metaphor and pun: the pilot literally takes wings/flies; but "take wings" also means to soar, to escape, to transcend earthly limitation. The range of professions, doctor, pilot, reflects her belief that he could transcend his circumstances entirely.

But now he tells her he is working
for you, that you value him so much
you give him one whole submachine
gun for him alone.

Analysis: The statement uses irony "you value him so much" to expose the distortion of value. The son interprets being armed as recognition, but it actually marks his entry into violence and likely death.

He says you are like a father to him
she is wondering what kind of father
would give a son hot and exploding
death, when he asks him for bread.

Analysis: The simile "like a father" highlights the emotional vacuum left by the absent parent: the employer has stepped into the space the father left. The metaphor "hot and exploding death" represents weapons. The final clause is a direct allusion to Matthew 7:9: "What man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?", a biblical question about whether a father would betray his son's trust. The employer gives not bread but its opposite: something hot, exploding, and deadly. This reframes the entire relationship as a biblical betrayal of paternal duty.

She went downtown and bought three
and one-third yards of black cloth

and a deep crowned and veiled hat
for the day he draw his bloody salary.

Analysis: The purchase of "black cloth" is foreshadowing: she is buying material for mourning clothes, anticipating his funeral. The "deep crowned and veiled hat" carries an allusion to the crown of thorns: a deep-crowned hat echoes Christ's crown of thorns, framing her son as a sacrificial victim. "Draw his bloody salary" is a pun: to "draw" a salary is to collect it; to "draw" blood is to wound. His paycheck is bought with blood, his own or others'.

She has no power over you and this
at the level of earth, what she has
are prayers and a mother's tears
and at knee city she uses them.

Analysis: The metaphor "knee city" represents sustained prayer. It shows her shift from physical helplessness to spiritual resistance, relying on faith as her only remaining form of power.

She says psalms for him
she reads psalms for you
she weeps for his soul
her eyewater covers you.

Analysis: The allusion "psalms" references biblical prayer, showing spiritual intervention. The metaphor "eyewater" represents tears functioning as both grief and a form of spiritual force directed at both her son and his employer.

She is throwing a partner
with Judas Iscariot's mother
the thief on the left-hand side
of the cross, his mother
is the banker, her draw though
is first and last for she still
throwing two hands as mother and
father.

Analysis: The metaphor "throwing a partner" is a reference to a Caribbean savings scheme: members contribute money into a communal pot in rotation, and each member in turn takes the full sum, called their "draw." Here the partner is made up of the mothers of the guilty: Judas Iscariot's mother, the thief on the left-hand side of the cross. All are women who loved their sons and could not stop them from choosing betrayal or violence. The woman is bonded with them in shared grief. "Two hands" is a pun on the two-hand role she plays as mother and father, and a reference to contributing two turns in the partner scheme; she gives twice as much, as always.

She is prepared, she is done. Absalom.

Analysis: The allusion "Absalom" references the son of the biblical King David. Absalom was handsome, beloved, and admired, and he betrayed his father, led a rebellion against him, and was killed. David's cry

upon hearing of his death, "O my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee!", is one of the Bible's most devastating expressions of parental grief. The poem ends on this single word: she has said everything, done everything, prayed everything. Now there is only the name of a son already lost.

About the poem

Author: Lorna Goodison (1947-)

Context: Reflects Caribbean realities of poverty, crime, and paternal absence

Core idea: A mother invests everything into her son as hope for escape, but systemic failure and violence redirect him toward destruction, leaving her powerless.

- **Main themes**

- Parenthood and sacrifice
- Violence and crime
- Lost potential
- Poverty and aspiration
- Spiritual struggle
- Societal failure
- **Mood:** Heavy, sorrowful, and fatalistic, with a constant sense of inevitability
- **Tone:** Mournful, accusatory, reflective, and resigned

Remember

- The **title** = monologue not dialogue; the woman speaks TO the man, not with him; he may not even be present
- **"Employed"** = possible sarcasm; possible reference to gang/militia/police recruitment
- **"Metallic tide"** = foreshadowing; the metal in her mouth returns as a submachine gun
- **"Made known to her"** = prophetic language; child of destiny, announced like a biblical birth
- **"Like the poor carry hope"** = most precise image of the poem: hope held desperately, as the only thing they have
- **"Equal and unbiased indifference"** = sardonic irony; fairness language used to describe abandonment
- **"Draw his bloody salary"** = **pun**: to draw pay AND to draw blood
- **"Deep crowned hat"** = **allusion** to the crown of thorns; son as sacrificial victim
- **"Partner"** = Caribbean savings scheme; she is bonded in grief with the mothers of Judas and the thief
- **Absalom** = David's beloved, betraying son, whose death brings the most famous cry of parental grief in the Bible
- The son begins as **hope**, not just a child; the turning point is the **submachine gun**