

The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

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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 metaphor "metallic tide rising in her mouth" represents morning sickness but also foreshadows bitterness and emotional pain. The pregnancy appears unplanned, introduced through discomfort rather than intention, suggesting instability from the very beginning of the child's life.

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

Analysis: The phrasing implies reliance on "signs," presenting the mother as somewhat naive and unprepared. "Not alone in her body" suggests an intrusive presence, reinforcing how the pregnancy overtakes her identity.

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" presents the child as an investment in survival and escape from poverty. The repetition of "hope" reflects a lack of material resources but an excess of expectation, showing the son as her primary chance at upward mobility.

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" functions as irony "equal and unbiased indifference", exposing neglect disguised as fairness. The father is reduced to a biological contributor rather than a caregiver, highlighting systemic paternal absence.

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. The range of professions reflects her belief that he could transcend his circumstances, reinforcing the theme of lost potential.

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 metaphor "hot and exploding death" represents weapons, contrasting nourishment with destruction. The line also functions as allusion "when he asks him for bread", referencing biblical teaching about parental care, intensifying the moral accusation.

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" acts as foreshadowing "black cloth", indicating she anticipates his funeral. The metaphor "bloody salary" suggests that his earnings will come through death, either his own or others', linking work directly to mortality.

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 references form allusion "Judas Iscariot" and allusion "the thief on the left-hand side of the cross", aligning her with mothers of betrayal and crime. The metaphor "throwing a partner" uses a Caribbean financial system to represent shared suffering and risk. The pun "two hands" emphasizes her dual role as both mother and father, reinforcing exhaustion and imbalance.

She is prepared, she is done. Absalom.

Analysis: The allusion "Absalom" references a rebellious son whose death brings profound grief. It signals resignation and inevitability, ending the poem with acceptance of tragic loss and the collapse of her hopes.

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 son begins as **hope**, not just a child
- The turning point is the **submachine gun**. That is where hope collapses
- Biblical **allusions** frame the son's path as betrayal and tragedy
- "Bloody salary" is the thesis. His life now pays out in death

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