

*For man who by an ill-borne hand  
was ground to dust  
shall rise as man again*

## FATHER TO SON (ODE TO BLACK BOYS)

The story begins like this:

the father is dying.

his 17 year-old son sits bedside,  
near to the fragile form at low tide.

son is reckoning with the greatest terror  
of his young life.

they are not alone.

the air is thick and crowded  
with the presence of spirits.

harriet is there  
tending to the blisters on her feet  
from all those journeys on up the road.

sojourner is there  
she carries blisters too.  
hers decorate her skin  
and come from the sting of social censorship  
as she spoke her truth.

medgar, martin, malcom—all those who served:  
farmer, lewis, parks, abernathy  
nat turner, frederick, booker t  
george washington – the carver  
biko, bantu steven biko, marcus  
even fannie lou, satchmo too  
all of them are there splittin' time  
between private side conversations  
and attending to the matter at hand:

the dying.

evening light sneaking through  
the window is tired but relentless  
like it's ready for bed  
but still fixin' to make a point

dust dances in that light  
and moves its party on over  
to the two hands

the one on the bottom frail  
and covered with parchment-like  
brown skin

the other, on top, surging  
and of skin supple with nervous sweat

father and son,  
fleeting life and young life uncertain

stillness, recognition, fear

and then, the father speaks.

these are the words that will last  
for all of time.

he says:

son, for seventeen years I've been trying  
to find the right words,  
the right words to . . .

what I'm trying to say is—  
god, give me strength . . .

*and in that moment, god did.*

*and the words were:*

son, I don't know if you can understand  
at such a tender age  
what it is that is truly killing me  
but I have to believe that one day  
light will come from yonder  
and grace you with vision

you have a sister and a mother  
and they desperately need  
a brother and a son

and so you have to understand  
that there is a reason  
that you and I, Black men  
are the most feared human beings  
on this planet

the human race is in a long season  
of ignorance, the ancient lessons  
have become a dim vibration  
unnoticed by a people tuned  
into the wrong frequency

life has handed down a circumstance  
to you so that you may respond to it  
in a way that fulfills a Divine plan

never has so much pain been  
accumulated in the heart of a people

you are an *african american* man  
flake of stone hewn  
from the mountain of masterpiece

you have follow me now, son  
follow me on this

all the times I told you, you were lazy  
I meant, that I had never seen so much talent  
and it scared me at what might be lost

all the times I told you, I Loved you  
what I meant, was that I was in awe of how  
beautiful you were to me

all the times I told you to grow a thicker skin  
what I meant, was that my heart was breaking  
at how this world could treat something so  
magnificent as you like a bacteria that it  
simply tolerated but would be happy to be rid of

when I told you to treat your sister right  
I meant, that she needed your strength  
to lean upon

when I told you, you don't know how much  
your mother needs you, I meant, that life  
had given her a son so that she could  
look *through* you and see her own beauty  
as a woman in ways that other men  
could not offer her

not even myself

they don't fear you because you are Black  
they fear you because you represent men  
who have always managed to carry  
the whole universe on our backs  
and *still* stand up straight

they fear that kind of strength

they don't fear you because you're violent  
they fear you because  
in the way you interact with other men  
you exhibit a tender, Loving way  
that makes their mouths grow dry  
in thirst for the same

you didn't survive the slave ship  
auction block  
plantation pain  
family separation  
name changes  
lynchings  
humiliation  
whip  
treatment as less than a mule  
—*god give me strength*

you didn't survive  
the false accusations of rape  
when you were just trying to get home  
without having anybody enact their fantasies  
of destruction out on you...

the burning glances  
the invisibility (*ralph ellison*)  
the physical shackles  
the psychological chains (*na'im akbar*)  
you didn't survive all of that

to become a generation that fades away at 17  
and becomes conversation about  
*what might have been*

I didn't raise you like I needed to  
but no matter how I raised you  
you have the ability to raise yourself  
from whatever circumstance  
because the universe made you *deep*

the scent on your skin is a soulful scent  
like burning sandalwood  
curling up to the sky  
that takes its breath full of you  
and then can't help but cry  
because your universe is so very deep  
you can't help that  
you were made to bring the rain

they fear the ripeness of you  
because you all are so close to being  
a role model for all men  
if you can just cross over that Jordan  
if you can just swim through the madness  
planted in your mind, peel back the blindfold  
of lies throughout time  
if you can see the majesty within . . .

life handed you pain  
because the plan is for you to  
to become something with that fertilizer

you are supposed to become  
what centuries from now will  
be looked back upon as the spiritual  
ascendance of humanity

the revolution will not be televised  
because they can't get no cameras  
up inside Black boys far enough  
no matter how many ways they violate them  
no cameras that can capture the sweet soul  
of their splendid essence

this is where the drama will play itself out  
in the unseen places  
where people whose faith lies in the material  
tremble with trepidation and cannot follow  
because spirit Loves the place  
where men are blind

son  
you aren't the trouble  
you're the light that trouble chases

you aren't the inferiority  
you are the superiority that inferior faces

you aren't the violence  
you're the place violence trespasses

you aren't the unintelligent  
they only try to miseducate  
uneducate, re-educate you  
because they understand fully your capacity to  
educate the world as to how to truly be a man

true soldier  
that's what you need to be, son, true soldier  
defend your community  
enlighten yourself as to your constructive  
and destructive potential

acquire the skills that will allow you  
to be the glue in the community  
*true soldier*

resort to violence last  
hold yourself to high standard  
discipline, common cause  
be a shelter for the younger ones  
be for them what you wish  
you had for yourself

you have withstood the lash  
for five hundred years  
still they can't get surrender to  
flow out with your silent tears

you have passed tests enough in this way  
you are qualified to be a true soldier  
SAT and ACT can't ever qualify you  
like enduring a good old-fashioned  
R-A-C I-S-T

you, through your people have withstood the lash  
for five hundred years, the time is now  
let the scar-trees upon your back  
become maps to a land called triumph  
lead us there

*father caught his breath  
for he was weak*

*he continued*

son  
you have to look around you  
and let down your walls  
so you can behold what life has created  
as harvest for this earth:  
african american men  
which means to say  
men constructed in such a way  
as to become the ones endowed  
with the responsibility  
of carrying the legacy and integrity  
of africa over to a place called america  
and even through the acid rain  
remain the same  
soulful, drum beating, dancing  
creating, celebrating, woman honoring  
mother Loving, sister protecting  
daughter cradling, wisdom drinking  
peacemaking, world shaking  
Love making, libation pouring  
self-educating, community lubricating  
herbally medicating, physically intimidating  
spiritually mediating, Creator Loving  
making the whole world aching to be like you  
but can't admit to wanting such a thing  
so they have to go with fear and disdain  
and create reasons and programs  
and pens and policies  
to hold you down  
and hold you in  
and hold you up

but hold up  
you ain't giving up, slowing up  
throwing up the african wisdom in you  
the stuff your mama's mama's mama broiled  
baked, boiled, kneaded, basted, fried, ground down  
snapped, skinned, cleaned, soaked, seasoned  
marinated, created with recipes from memory  
and intuition that called for two teaspoons of tears  
and two cups of passion and pain  
and a handful of forgiveness  
and just a pinch of desire  
and season to taste with  
*boy i'm gon' beat your tail*

prepared for you to eat from so you could be full  
from a meal of our own doing  
our own values, lessons, preachings, proddings  
and other manner of discipline

no, you were fed to be belly full  
so you wouldn't have to go begging  
to another culture, another people's plate  
for a meal composed of such ingredients  
that your own bowels would disagree violently  
and upheave that precious african self-Love  
we concocted before there was an america

you were the ones, Black boys  
chosen to bring this particular brand  
of spirituality over here to the middle of this  
material madness and yet still emerge  
after hundreds of seasons of degradation  
to teach the world a lesson about how to be men

you, Black boys, Black men  
life chose you to be teachers  
you were given such gifts in that regard  
that all you have to do is reach into your bag  
of tricks pull out the tools of your trade  
and proper class will be in session

you will teach that violence  
is not the endpoint and not the whole point  
that true men live in harmony with the world  
instead of trying to conquer it

you, Black teachers, will teach that  
science is not to be the basis of our spirituality  
but a thread in our web of knowing  
that we choose to believe in things not proven  
experimentally, that we believe in the unseen things  
soul, spirit, vibe, pulse  
funk, rhythm, romance  
ancestors, descendants  
the future, the past, the dearly departed  
the lives barely started

the spirits waiting at the door  
to be born into seed between man and woman  
waiting for the flicker of flame  
to grow into Loving commitment  
and dedication to building a family together  
so that the african lesson can go on being taught

so that we won't have to worry about  
ever again being bought  
not with money, material, status, power, control  
the sweet seductives of this candy store place

no, we'd rather believe in the spirit  
and Love our Lovers with a faith in the spirit  
and raise our children in the company of spirit  
and conduct our communities to the rhythm of spirit

not this unnatural cadence  
this out-of-balance drumbeat given birth  
by those who never understood the drum

our way of talking not only with each other  
but with our universe

our whole being was packaged into each beat  
and sent out as ripples through the air  
drifting into space, landing on planets  
and bouncing back as sound waves  
to be picked up by the scientific creation  
of western technology known as satellites  
a hollering and a fussing about how they  
discovered evidence of alien intelligence  
all the while denying our african intelligence  
when we were the ones who sent the signals  
in the first place

and they race toward space  
as though there is some distant and ancient  
civilization out there somewhere  
but we were that civilization  
not somewhere but this where

folks more willing to credit martians  
than africans with being intelligent

and why do you think so many *authorities*  
are so afraid of you young Black men?

I believe it is because they are representatives  
of institutions whose existence you threaten  
for the equation reads like this:

give a Black man a book and the reason  
to read it and he turns one key  
cause the reason is all he needed

give a Black man a healthy body  
mind and spirit and he turns another key  
sure enough, cause he can't *can* if he's depleted

give a Black man the opportunity to walk down  
his intended road in life without being hounded  
like a dog and he turns another key

give a Black man the space in which to Love  
his Black woman, sister, daughter, family  
and not be punished for it  
embarrassed by it  
made to feel ashamed for it  
and he will have turned the next key

give a Black man a moment to breathe  
so that he may find the universe inside of him  
and he will have turned the final key  
to unlock the jail house and set all his people  
finally free

on the basketball court they feared michael jordan  
because he had fierce excellence within him  
same for jackie robinson, jack johnson, and jim brown

but look son, what you have to know  
is they fear you in the school house that way too  
they fear you excelling at reading  
and writing and science and history  
and most of all, they fear you excelling  
at knowing yourself, growing yourself,  
gaining confidence in your abilities,  
because you all were given so much more  
than the capacity to play a mean saxophone  
tap dance like a whirlwind,  
throw a fierce freestyle rhyme . . .

you were given things so much deeper  
such as a natural inclination  
to bow down before your elders  
and submit to the vastness of the life  
they have lived

you are supposed to show the world  
what it means to be there for your son  
when the world tells him he's a monster  
you give him the tonic  
to make him see his true self:  
*Everlasting Majesty*

you are supposed to show the world  
what it means to be there  
for your daughter . . .

matter of fact, son,  
I want you to do this one day  
when you have a daughter:  
every month on the day of her birth  
buy her a rose, you pick the color  
and don't be buying one of those tired out  
supermarket roses either  
go to a flower shop and buy her  
a 10-dollar rose

you give her that rose every month  
on the day of her birth  
12 days a year  
for every year while she's growing up  
and you tell her that  
*beauty belongs beside beauty*  
and that's what the rose is for

that way she will never ever be  
overly impressed by any wack mack  
slick rick, smooth groove, fly daddy  
trying to soften her up with flowers

she will know that she deserves  
to have beauty by her side  
and that it was a Black man  
who taught her that

'cause a 10-dollar rose  
given in the right way  
is worth a million  
and a rose given by another game  
doesn't truly smell quite the same

and I want you to do this:  
when your mama cries you comfort her  
and tell her it will be all right

she'll believe in you because  
she'll believe you have the strength  
to take care of her when she needs it

make her feel like she doesn't have to  
hold up the sky all the time  
that she can put it down now and then  
cause you'll be there being a man

know something about responsibility  
the community isn't here to serve you  
you've been given life so that you can serve  
the community

take the younger brothers by the hand  
look them straight in the eye  
see them  
see them

teach them about how you can't be all  
you need to be  
unless they are all  
of what they need to be  
this is called interdependence  
and though our american declaration  
is of independence, we african americans  
are not a people of absolute individualism  
we come from communal ground

tell them you need them to succeed  
tell them that when they hurt you hurt  
use compassion to color them in  
so they don't walk around  
invisible to everyone

find the courage to call them out  
when they step in the wrong way  
it might be hard but I know you have  
the universe inside you

and do this:  
every time you get into a relationship  
with a woman, be a better man than  
you were in the last relationship  
with a woman

I won't accept you treading water  
not when you might become the role model  
for the next brother who  
steps to my precious daughter

make progress  
learn to listen  
tame your ego  
treat her like something special  
when you're around people who  
are special to you

understand that half her pain is about  
the way this world injures you  
let her feel that pain with you

and . . .

do this with your son, because I'm afraid  
I haven't done the same with you:  
every time a man or boy teaches him  
that a woman is a lesser thing  
you hold up life for a minute  
and teach him the right lesson  
you teach him that a woman *is* life  
that a woman is the passage way for life  
that woman may one day be  
the light of his life

cry with your son, laugh with your son  
never ever fear your son  
no matter what ugliness he passes through  
stay there with him, don't back off  
he needs you to be the one  
to make him hurt a little  
so he won't wind up hurting a lot

teach him that a man demands respect  
by demanding of himself that he give respect  
to all who cross his path

that if a man challenges him to be a man  
and fight, that he can only be a man  
if he does not depend on violence  
to gain his sense of manliness

teach him that the illegal substances  
that carry him away from his pain  
do not truthfully carry him away  
from his pain but further into it

teach him to shout his anger to the sky  
to express ugly feelings in beautiful ways

teach him that this is what gordon parks  
did with his camera  
and robert johnson did with his strings

teach him greatness through humility  
strength through tenderness  
voice through silence  
and that being hard is about  
surrendering to the softness of vulnerability

teach him to excuse himself from any table  
to nod downward to people in respect  
and not upward in dominance  
for we were made to live among the beauty  
of Creation and not above it

teach him that the black and white  
that people teach us are always gray  
when you get down to the truth of things

teach him to say please when he orders his food  
instead of talkin' 'bout:  
*give me this, and give me that*

teach him to keep his eyes off other women  
when he's with his woman  
and even when he's not with his woman

teach him that the words that  
escape from his lips drip with potency  
that can either create or destroy  
so he should be careful and considerate  
when he chooses those words

teach him to stay on top of the health of his body  
so he won't end up underneath the ground  
'cause he was too busy getting blazed  
or money crazed or having his sacred song  
rephrased into a blues track for shootin smack  
runnin game, sniffin fame, living lame,  
eatin the same garbage from the same  
self-pollutin train

teach him that the racism directed at him  
is a compliment to his potential  
because nobody ever took the time to hold down  
something they thought could never rise up

teach him that the madness he sees around him  
in his community is not there for him to emulate  
but to eradicate

encourage him to tell his story  
in as many ways as possible  
in his clothing  
in his walk  
in his speech  
in the people he keeps in his life  
through his laughter  
through his relationships

teach him to write poetry  
and read books written by Black geniuses  
long before he ever came along  
acting like he knew everything

teach him that before he calls himself being a man  
he better know enough to recognize that so far  
he has only been a boy

teach him that when you were a child  
you spoke as a child  
and understood as a child  
and thought as a child  
but that when you became a man  
you put away childish things

teach him that his people need him  
to become a teacher in life  
and that to do that he needs  
to become a student of life

teach him that the reason  
it feels so good to have sex with a woman  
is because you are rubbing up against  
the possibility of Divine reproduction  
and that if you are not ready for the baby  
then you're probably not ready to sex the lady

teach him to speak words of Love and lessons  
to his children in the midst of days as they pass  
not when the days have run low  
and the crossing over has begun  
people always talking about how they  
Love summer soon as they see the falling snow

teach him to appreciate the blue in sky  
the green in the grass  
and the Black in his past

ask him why he thinks he deserves  
to be your son  
make him think about the ways  
in which he is special to you

help him to understand that relationships  
are not to be taken for granted  
that they die from neglect just like the yard  
he never cuts or pulls the weeds from or waters  
no matter how many times you tell him

tell him that if he clutters his relationships  
with mess like he does his bedroom  
that a relationship won't wait around forever  
for him to pick up his dirty drawers

and son, remember this as you continue  
to become a man  
Black men must be special  
because why else would we be given  
the tear inducing glory of a Black woman  
to behold

why else would we be given the neck breaking  
beauty in that full ripeness of womanhood  
that nurses us, comforts us  
stands up for us, and demands of us  
to become all of what we are  
because they see the universe in us  
before we do  
I promise it's true

son, the simple truth is  
even in a society that done gone mad  
and calls itself colorblind  
you are undeniably an african american male

if you disrespect that fact  
you disrespect the Artist that painted  
the portrait that is *you* in the first place

it was Creation Itself that paused  
took a breath  
looked to the canvas  
and went to the broad strokes  
that made you  
bald headed, dred locked, fro-ed, cornrowed  
faded, slicked, waved, redboned, high yella  
white as night, coal black, skillet blonde  
broad nosed, thick lipped, honey-dipped  
brown eyed, thick in the backside  
wide from the muscle  
made of tussle with every cotton thorn  
scornful glance  
god awful circumstance, indignation  
oil slick, tar and feather spit down  
from discrimination  
and pathological dehumanization

yeah  
Creator painted you  
chest thumpin', foot stompin'  
voice like Barry  
extraordinary visionary

that's why you're always  
makin' up rhymes  
pickin' up sticks  
making castles out of toothpicks

chicken Loving  
hot sauce smackin'  
finger licking  
high steppin'  
sensitive brother masquerading as  
invincible

but you just a little  
greens grubbin'  
Lovin' in the bathtubbin'  
story telling  
always tryin' to get over  
comin' crawling back like rover  
never learnin'  
but still trying to get it right

big Black beautiful kite in flight  
need the wind just right  
so you can take off to your dreams  
get up on a cloud somewhere  
and catch a break  
look down on Creation  
and realize that what the Man got  
don't look so hot from up here

that maybe you don't need to try so hard  
to fit in with the mainstream  
and accommodate the mainstream  
and act like the mainstream  
and think like the mainstream  
that maybe you already had your own stream  
all along you just thought the water was too deep  
or too shallow or too... black

yeah, you got painted bold and solid  
by Creator getting' wild with the brush  
thick thighs stretchin' out slacks made for  
bony boys, matter of fact,  
spendin' life tryin' to fit into other people's

clothes, other people's schools  
other people's expectations  
you are the circle stuffed over and over  
into the square, but we're all about the circle  
and we flow into and into  
each other and everything around us

we are the sweet sunrise  
in the breast of bitter morning  
we are the flicker beyond the horizon  
the wink of coming light while  
still in the clutch of bitter night

son, ask yourself this every day:  
what makes you the most feared  
human being on the planet?

you have to be something powerful  
to engender that much fear

you'll find your own answers to that question  
but I'm trying to leave you with mine

I say the pain of a woman's childbirth  
is beyond men because only woman was meant  
to be a mother

I say the pain of Black boys and Black men  
is beyond other men because only we were  
meant to show this earth what it means  
to rise from two thousand seasons  
of degradation and shake it off like an  
afternoon slumber

you, my son, are a Black man,  
and you need to know  
you're made from sturdy lumber

### *FINAL LIGHT*

---

something in that moment allowed  
the words from the father to sink into the son

tears came forth like maple running in syrup  
down bark not used to bleeding like that

the spirit of bundini brown in the corner  
round after round  
exhorting young muhammad ali  
to *rumble young man, rumble*  
slowly built up its presence within the room

*rumble young man, rumble*  
not a call to violence  
but a demand that he let his Black brilliance shine  
through the haze of invisibility and disbelief

that he allow his Creator-given gifts to dance  
and float and swing and sting  
up in that spotlight ring  
and present themselves to a wounded world  
so all could see that a man who releases  
his blossom is a beautiful thing

bundini's voice started as a whisper so faint  
the son wasn't sure he had heard it

it gained volume:  
*rumble young man, rumble*

he heard ali's proclamation after beating liston:  
*I shook up the world!*

he heard waves crashing within him  
and he could smell the blatant  
scent of salt within the sea

birds flew over the water in his mind  
but they were not seagulls  
they were black birds  
sankofa in flight

then the drums  
louder, louder  
bundini: *rumble young man, rumble*  
ali: *I shook up the world!*  
drumbeats  
*rumble young man*  
*I must be the greatest!*  
drumbeats  
*rumble*

tears branched out across high cheekbone  
they were their own stream  
they fell from warm face  
to cold sheets

weak hand grasped  
young hand  
strong voice took over:

dad, there's something I've never told you.

what's that, son?

I've always Loved you.  
and I've always Loved myself.  
you wanna know why?

why, son?

'cause i'll never forget what you used to tell me  
when I was little and I would come home mad  
cause people were calling me names at school  
telling me to go back to Africa

what was that, son?

you said:

son, tell 'em, *I AM Africa*  
*and Africa ain't going nowhere in me*

and you told me:  
don't let that mess ever get you down  
'cause you were born of a Black woman  
of Black ancestral grandmothers  
whose fruit, like every woman's  
is born *Divine phenomenon...*

lifetime of worry released itself  
as subtle smile on father's face

weak hand, father's  
clenched young hand, son's

dust finally put down its dance  
light pulled back to the windowsill  
spirit-folk shook themselves in wonder  
then got on down the road

final whisper from father to son  
was both proud approval and loving command:

*rumble, young man . . . rumble.*

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This inspiration, *Father to Son*, flows out in the context of a people's centuries-old imposed and learned self-rejection, and an ancient, enduring determination to Love ourselves, purposefully, no matter. It is a Love letter for anyone who truly cares for the healing and wholeness of all.

Written and originally recited as part of a keynote for the Illinois Dept. of Children and Family Services Eighth Annual African American Advisory Council Statewide Conference, in Chicago, Illinois, April 14, 2000. The conference theme that year was a celebration and honoring of African American males, and a call to our collective and personal responsibility. I was honored to deliver my keynote as a last-minute replacement for the poet Nikki Giovanni, she whose spirit in words first broke open poetry in me.

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Jaiya John is the founder of Soul Water Rising, a global *human* mission. His tools are *words* (writing and speaking), *relationship* (gardening beauty in youth and adults), and *Loving spirit*. His latest book is *Lyric of Silence*, a poetic telling of the human soul journey. All of Jaiya's titles are available through booksellers large and small. Learn more about this mission at [soulwater.org](http://soulwater.org), and on [facebook.com/JaiyaJohn](https://facebook.com/JaiyaJohn) where fresh new poetry and writing are shared regularly. Peace, Blessings, and Truth, Always!