

Maine Harrell

Heavy is the Womb That Bears Black Boys

Heavy is the womb that bears black boys. It is, after all, the mother lode. Crucible to men and mankind alike. Humanity drew its breath there and civilization found its origins. Our mothers have given the world rulers, revolutionaries, scholars, and soldiers. Black mothers have given the world life.

In Amerika hardship and struggle have been their recompense. Here, our mothers saw themselves pimped in service of chattel slavery, their wombs opened for the business of brutality. Their children were born to serve, to be sold or, if not, to be slain. Still they endured.

They held families together with determination, courage, and grit. They survived labor pains and the pains of slavery's labors. For freedom they fought, killed, and died. And as always, black mothers kept right on giving life.

Today the struggles continue, and thus, so do the triumphs. Our mothers rear genius in an Amerika that scoffs at black intellect. They conjure pride in children ashamed of simply being and, in their hands, minimum-wage jobs become like lead to an alchemist.

As always, death shadows them, their seed. They used to see their boys auctioned off to unknown plantations; now they weep as damn near a generation of us are carted away to maximum-security nether worlds. They used to see us lynched; now they cradle our corpses in blood soaked streets.

Through it all their love remains transcendent, unconditional. They love us when we're right, when we're wrong. They love us in spite of all we think we are, all we'll ever—and never—be. No doubt, some of our mothers fear us for reasons real and imagined, but they embrace us nevertheless. We're still their sons.

And just as their sons have been demonized, so have they. The black mother has been reincarnated as the worst sort of social parasite, from crack ho to welfare queen. She's the bug-eyed bullying matriarch on that "new sitcom," the cold-hearted careerist bitch on the talk shows. Still, mama endures.

Which isn't to suggest our mothers are perfect, they aren't. Sometimes their pressures—sexism, racism, mounting debts, fears that one day Junior might not make it home—become too intense, too heavy. Sometimes they're just not prepared for the obligations of motherhood. Sometimes fissures riddle their armor and they go under, to drugs or to liquor or to a wholesale psychological shutdown.

They hurt us, they use us, they leave us.

Who in Amerika, however, can stand in judgment of black mothers? Who can really know their burden, their pains? Who can really know the fears and expectations and hopes of women whose sons, it often seems, are born only to die! Black men may love our mothers, cherish and respect them. We may be as familiar with them as well as anyone. But who, besides our mothers themselves, truly understands how heavy is the womb that bears black boys?