

Classic Poetry Series

Audre Lorde
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Audre Lorde(18 February 1934 – 17 November 1992)

Audre Lorde (born Audrey Geraldine Lorde) was a Caribbean-American writer, poet and activist.

Life

Lorde was born in New York City to Caribbean immigrants from Grenada, Frederick Byron Lorde (called Byron) and Linda Gertrude Belmar Lorde, who settled in Harlem. Nearsighted to the point of being legally blind, and the youngest of three daughters (her sisters named Phyllis and Helen), Lorde grew up hearing her mother's stories about the West Indies. She learned to talk while she learned to read, at the age of four, and her mother taught her to write at around the same time. She wrote her first poem when she was in eighth grade.

Born Audrey Geraldine Lorde, she chose to drop the "y" from her name while still a child, explaining in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, that she was more interested in the artistic symmetry of the "e"-endings in the two side-by-side names "Audre Lorde" than in spelling her name the way her parents had intended.

After graduating from Hunter College High School and experiencing the grief of her best friend Genevieve "Gennie" Thompson's death, Lorde immediately left her parents' home and became estranged from her family. She attended Hunter College from 1954 to 1959 and graduated with a bachelor's degree. While studying library science, Lorde supported herself by working various odd jobs such as factory worker, ghost writer, social worker, X-ray technician, medical clerk, and arts and crafts supervisor, moving out of Harlem to Stamford, Connecticut and beginning to explore her lesbian sexuality.

In 1954, she spent a pivotal year as a student at the National University of Mexico, a period she described as a time of affirmation and renewal: she confirmed her identity on personal and artistic levels as a lesbian and poet. On her return to New York, she attended college, worked as a librarian, continued writing and became an active participant in the gay culture of Greenwich Village. She furthered her education at Columbia University, earning a master's degree in library science in 1961. She also worked during this time as a librarian at Mount Vernon Public Library and married attorney Edwin Rollins; they divorced in 1970 after having two children, Elizabeth and Jonathan. In 1966, Lorde became head librarian at Town School Library in New York City, where she remained until 1968.

In 1968 Lorde was writer-in-residence at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, where she met Frances Clayton, a white professor of psychology, who was to be her romantic partner until 1989. From 1977 to 1978 Lorde had a brief affair with the sculptor and painter Mildred Thompson. The two met in Nigeria in 1977 at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77). Their affair ran its course during the time that Thompson lived in Washington, D.C. and was teaching at Howard University. Lorde died on November 17, 1992, in St. Croix, (where she had been living with Gloria I. Joseph), after a 14-year struggle with breast cancer. She was 58. In her own words, Lorde was a "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet". In an African naming ceremony before her death, she took the name Gambda Adisa, which means "Warrior: She Who Makes Her Meaning Known".

Career

Lorde's poetry was published very regularly during the 1960s — in <a href="

Her second volume, *Cables to Rage* (1970), which was mainly written during her tenure at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, addressed themes of love, betrayal, childbirth and the complexities of raising children. It is particularly noteworthy for the poem "Martha", in which Lorde poetically confirms her homosexuality: "[W]e shall love each other here if ever at all." Later books continued her political aims in lesbian and gay rights, and feminism. In 1980, together with Barbara Smith and Cherríe Moraga, she co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, the first U.S. publisher for women of colour. Lorde was State Poet of New York from 1991 to 1992.

Theory

Lorde criticised feminists of the 1960s, from the National Organization for Women to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, for focusing on the particular experiences and values of white middle-class women. Her writings are based on the "theory of difference", the idea that the binary opposition between men and women is overly simplistic: although feminists have found it necessary to present the illusion of a solid, unified whole, the category of women itself is full of subdivisions.

Lorde identified issues of class, race, age, gender and even health — this last was added as she battled cancer in her later years — as being fundamental to the female experience. She argued that, although the gender difference has received all the focus, these other differences are also essential and must be

recognised and addressed. "Lorde", it is written, "puts her emphasis on the authenticity of experience. She wants her difference acknowledged but not judged; she does not want to be subsumed into the one general category of 'woman'".

While acknowledging that the differences between women are wide and varied, most of Lorde's works are concerned with two subsets that concerned her primarily — race and sexuality. She observes that black women's experiences are different from those of white women, and that, because the experience of the white woman is considered normative, the black woman's experiences are marginalised; similarly, the experiences of the lesbian (and, in particular, the black lesbian) are considered aberrational, not in keeping with the true heart of the feminist movement. Although they are not considered normative, Lorde argues that these experiences are nevertheless valid and feminist.

Lorde and Contemporary Feminist Thought

Lorde set out actively to challenge white women, confronting issues of racism in feminist thought. She maintained that a great deal of the scholarship of white feminists served to augment the oppression of black women, a conviction that led to angry confrontation, most notably in a scathing open letter addressed to radical lesbian feminist Mary Daly, to which Lorde stated she received no reply.

This fervent disagreement with notable white feminists furthered her persona as an "outsider": "in the institutional milieu of black feminist and black lesbian feminist scholars [...] and within the context of conferences sponsored by white feminist academics, Lorde stood out as an angry, accusatory, isolated black feminist lesbian voice".

The criticism did not go only one way: many white feminists were angered by Lorde's brand of feminism. In her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", Lorde attacked the underlying racism of feminism, describing it as unrecognized dependence on the patriarchy. She argued that, by denying difference in the category of women, feminists merely passed on old systems of oppression and that, in so doing, they were preventing any real, lasting change. Her argument aligned white feminists with white male slave-masters, describing both as "agents of oppression".

In so doing, she enraged a great many white feminists, who saw her essay as an attempt to privilege her identities as black and lesbian, and assume a moral authority based on suffering. Suffering was a condition universal to women, they claimed, and to accuse feminists of racism would cause divisiveness rather than

heal it. In response, Lorde wrote "what you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering. Anger, not moral authority."

Poetry

Lorde focused her discussion of difference not only on differences between groups of women but between conflicting differences within the individual. "I am defined as other in every group I'm part of", she declared. "The outsider, both strength and weakness. Yet without community there is certainly no liberation, no future, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between me and my oppression." She described herself both as a part of a "continuum of women" and a "concert of voices" within herself.

Her conception of her many layers of selfhood is replicated in the multi-genres of her work. Critic Carmen Birkle wrote: "Her multicultural self is thus reflected in a multicultural text, in multi-genres, in which the individual cultures are no longer separate and autonomous entities but melt into a larger whole without losing their individual importance". Her refusal to be placed in a particular category, whether social or literary, was characteristic of her determination to come across as an individual rather than a stereotype.

A Litany for Survival

'For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours:

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid

our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive

Audre Lorde

A Woman Speaks

Moon marked and touched by sun
my magic is unwritten
but when the sea turns back
it will leave my shape behind.
I seek no favor
untouched by blood
unrelenting as the curse of love
permanent as my errors
or my pride
I do not mix
love with pity
nor hate with scorn
and if you would know me
look into the entrails of Uranus
where the restless oceans pound.

I do not dwell
within my birth nor my divinities
who am ageless and half-grown
and still seeking
my sisters
witches in Dahomey
wear me inside their coiled cloths
as our mother did
mourning.

I have been woman
for a long time
beware my smile
I am treacherous with old magic
and the noon's new fury
with all your wide futures
promised
I am
woman
and not white.

Audre Lorde

Afterimages

I

However the image enters
its force remains within
my eyes
rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve
wild for life, relentless and acquisitive
learning to survive
where there is no food
my eyes are always hungry
and remembering
however the image enters
its force remains.

A white woman stands bereft and empty
a black boy hacked into a murderous lesson
recalled in me forever
like a lurch of earth on the edge of sleep
etched into my visions
food for dragonfish that learn
to live upon whatever they must eat
fused images beneath my pain.

II

The Pearl River floods through the streets of Jackson
A Mississippi summer televised.
Trapped houses kneel like sinners in the rain
a white woman climbs from her roof to a passing boat
her fingers tarry for a moment on the chimney
now awash
tearless and no longer young, she holds
a tattered baby's blanket in her arms.
In a flickering afterimage of the nightmare rain
a microphone
thrust up against her flat bewildered words
 "we jest come from the bank yestiddy
 borrowing money to pay the income tax
 now everything's gone. I never knew
 it could be so hard."
Despair weighs down her voice like Pearl River mud
caked around the edges

her pale eyes scanning the camera for help or explanation
unanswered
she shifts her search across the watered street, dry-eyed
"hard, but not this hard."

Two tow-headed children hurl themselves against her
hanging upon her coat like mirrors
until a man with ham-like hands pulls her aside
snarling "She ain't got nothing more to say!"
and that lie hangs in his mouth
like a shred of rotting meat.

III

I inherited Jackson, Mississippi.
For my majority it gave me Emmett Till
his 15 years puffed out like bruises
on plump boy-cheeks
his only Mississippi summer
whistling a 21 gun salute to Dixie
as a white girl passed him in the street
and he was baptized my son forever
in the midnight waters of the Pearl.

His broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year
when I walked through a northern summer
my eyes averted
from each corner's photographs
newspapers protest posters magazines
Police Story, Confidential, True
the avid insistence of detail
pretending insight or information
the length of gash across the dead boy's loins
his grieving mother's lamentation
the severed lips, how many burns
his gouged out eyes
sewed shut upon the screaming covers
louder than life
all over
the veiled warning, the secret relish
of a black child's mutilated body
fingered by street-corner eyes
bruise upon livid bruise
and wherever I looked that summer

I learned to be at home with children's blood
with savored violence
with pictures of black broken flesh
used, crumpled, and discarded
lying amid the sidewalk refuse
like a raped woman's face.

A black boy from Chicago
whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi
testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do
his teachers
ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue
and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone
in the name of white womanhood
they took their aroused honor
back to Jackson
and celebrated in a whorehouse
the double ritual of white manhood
confirmed.

IV

"If earth and air and water do not judge them who are
we to refuse a crust of bread?"

Emmett Till rides the crest of the Pearl, whistling
24 years his ghost lay like the shade of a raped woman
and a white girl has grown older in costly honor
(what did she pay to never know its price?)
now the Pearl River speaks its muddy judgment
and I can withhold my pity and my bread.

"Hard, but not this hard."

Her face is flat with resignation and despair
with ancient and familiar sorrows
a woman surveying her crumpled future
as the white girl besmirched by Emmett's whistle
never allowed her own tongue
without power or conclusion
unvoiced
she stands adrift in the ruins of her honor
and a man with an executioner's face
pulls her away.

Within my eyes
the flickering afterimages of a nightmare rain
a woman wrings her hands
beneath the weight of agonies remembered
I wade through summer ghosts
betrayed by vision
hers and my own
becoming dragonfish to survive
the horrors we are living
with tortured lungs
adapting to breathe blood.

A woman measures her life's damage
my eyes are caves, chunks of etched rock
tied to the ghost of a black boy
whistling
crying and frightened
her tow-headed children cluster
like little mirrors of despair
their father's hands upon them
and soundlessly
a woman begins to weep.

Audre Lorde

Coping

It has rained for five days
running
the world is
a round puddle
of sunless water
where small islands
are only beginning
to cope
a young boy
in my garden
is bailing out water
from his flower patch
when I ask him why
he tells me
young seeds that have not seen sun
forget
and drown easily.

Audre Lorde

Father Son And Holy Ghost

I have not ever seen my father's grave.

Not that his judgment eyes
have been forgotten
nor his great hands' print
on our evening doorknobs
 one half turn each night
 and he would come
 drabbled with the world's business
 massive and silent
 as the whole day's wish
 ready to redefine
 each of our shapes
but now the evening doorknobs
wait and do not recognize us
as we pass.

Each week a different woman
regular as his one quick glass
each evening
pulls up the grass his stillness grows
calling it weed.
Each week a different woman
has my mother's face
and he
who time has changeless
must be amazed
who knew and loved
but one.

My father died in silence
loving creation
and well-defined response
he lived still judgments
on familiar things
and died knowing
a January 15th that year me.

Lest I go into dust

I have not ever seen my father's grave.

Audre Lorde

For Each Of You

Be who you are and will be
learn to cherish
that boisterous Black Angel that drives you
up one day and down another
protecting the place where your power rises
running like hot blood
from the same source
as you pain.

When you are hungry
learn to eat
whatever sustains you
until morning
but do not misled by details
simply because you live them.

Do not let your head deny
your hands
any memory of what passes through them
not your eyes
nor your heart
everything can be used
except what is wasteful
(you will need
to remember this when you are accused of destruction.)
Even when they are dangerous examine the heart of those machines you hate
before you discard them
and never mourn the lack of their power
lest you be condemned
to relieve them.
If you do not learn to hate
you will never be lonely
enough
to love easily
nor will you always be brave
although it does not grow any easier

Do not pretend to convenient beliefs
even when they are righteous

you will never be able to defend your city
while shouting.

Remember whatever pain you bring back
from your dreaming
but do not look for new gods
in the sea
nor in any part of a rainbow
Each time you love
love as deeply as if were
forever
only nothing is
eternal.

Speak proudly to your children
where ever you may find them
tell them
you are offspring of slaves
and your mother was
a princess
in darkness.

Audre Lorde

From The House Of Yemanjá

My mother had two faces and a frying pot
where she cooked up her daughters
into girls
before she fixed our dinner.
My mother had two faces
and a broken pot
where she hid out a perfect daughter
who was not me
I am the sun and moon and forever hungry
for her eyes.

I bear two women upon my back
one dark and rich and hidden
in the ivory hungers of the other
mother
pale as a witch
yet steady and familiar
brings me bread and terror
in my sleep
her breasts are huge exciting anchors
in the midnight storm.

All this has been
before
in my mother's bed
time has no sense
I have no brothers
and my sisters are cruel.

Mother I need
mother I need
mother I need your blackness now
as the august earth needs rain.
I am

the sun and moon and forever hungry
the sharpened edge
where day and night shall meet
and not be

one.

Audre Lorde

Hanging Fire

I am fourteen
and my skin has betrayed me
the boy I cannot live without
still sucks his thumb
in secret
how come my knees are
always so ashy
what if I die
before morning
and momma's in the bedroom
with the door closed.

I have to learn how to dance
in time for the next party
my room is too small for me
suppose I die before graduation
they will sing sad melodies
but finally
tell the truth about me
There is nothing I want to do
and too much
that has to be done
and momma's in the bedroom
with the door closed.

Nobody even stops to think
about my side of it
I should have been on Math Team
my marks were better than his
why do I have to be
the one
wearing braces
I have nothing to wear tomorrow
will I live long enough
to grow up
and momma's in the bedroom
with the door closed.

Audre Lorde

Inheritance

I.

My face resembles your face
less and less each day. When I was young
no one mistook whose child I was.
Features build coloring
alone among my creamy fine-boned sisters
marked me Byron's daughter.

No sun set when you died, but a door
opened onto my mother. After you left
she grieved her crumpled world aloft
an iron fist sweated with business symbols
a printed blotter dwell in the house of Lord's
your hollow voice changing down a hospital corridor
yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil.

II.

I rummage through the deaths you lived
swaying on a bridge of question.
At seven in Barbados
dropped into your unknown father's life
your courage vault from his tailor's table
back to the sea.
Did the Grenada treeferns sing
your 15th summer as you jumped ship
to seek your mother
finding her too late
surrounded with new sons?

Who did you bury to become the enforcer of the law
the handsome legend
before whose raised arm even trees wept
a man of deep and wordless passion
who wanted sons and got five girls?
You left the first two scratching in a treefern's shade
the youngest is a renegade poet
searching for your answer in my blood.

My mother's Grenville tales
spin through early summer evenings.
But you refused to speak of home
of stepping proud Black and penniless
into this land where only white men
ruled by money. How you labored
in the docks of the Hotel Astor
your bright wife a chambermaid upstairs
welded love and survival to ambition
as the land of promise withered
crashed the hotel closed
and you peddle dawn-bought apples
from a push-cart on Broadway.

Does an image of return
wealthy and triumphant
warm your chilblained fingers
as you count coins in the Manhattan snow
or is it only Linda
who dreams of home?

When my mother's first-born cries for milk
in the brutal city winter
do the faces of your other daughters dim
like the image of the treeferned yard
where a dark girl first cooked for you
and her ash heap still smells of curry?

III.

Did the secret of my sisters steal your tongue
like I stole money from your midnight pockets
stubborn and quaking
as you threaten to shoot me if I am the one?
The naked lightbulbs in our kitchen ceiling
glint off your service revolver
as you load whispering.

Did two little dark girls in Grenada
dart like flying fish
between your averted eyes
and my pajamaless body

our last adolescent summer?
Eavesdropped orations
to your shaving mirror
our most intense conversations
were you practicing how to tell me
of my twin sisters abandoned
as you had been abandoned
by another Black woman seeking
her fortune Grenada Barbados
Panama Grenada.
New York City.

IV.

You bought old books at auctions
for my unlanguage world
gave me your idols Marcus Garvey Citizen Kane
and morsels from your dinner plate
when I was seven.

I owe you my Dahomeyan jaw
the free high school for gifted girls
no one else thought I should attend
and the darkness that we share.
Our deepest bonds remain
the mirror and the gun.

V.

An elderly Black judge
known for his way with women
visits this island where I live
shakes my hand, smiling.
'I knew your father,' he says
'quite a man!' Smiles again.
I flinch at his raised eyebrow.
A long-gone woman's voice
lashes out at me in parting
'You will never be satisfied
until you have the whole world
in your bed!'

Now I am older than you were when you died
overwork and silence exploding your brain.
You are gradually receding from my face.

Who were you outside the 23rd Psalm?
Knowing so little
how did I become so much
like you?

Your hunger for rectitude
blossoms into rage
the hot tears of mourning
never shed for you before
your twisted measurements
the agony of denial
the power of unshared secrets.

Audre Lorde

Love Poem

Speak earth and bless me with what is richest
make sky flow honey out of my hips
rigid mountains
spread over a valley
carved out by the mouth of rain.

And I knew when I entered her I was
high wind in her forests hollow
fingers whispering sound
honey flowed
from the split cup
impaled on a lance of tongues
on the tips of her breasts on her navel
and my breath
howling into her entrances
through lungs of pain.

Greedy as herring-gulls
or a child
I swing out over the earth
over and over
again.

Audre Lorde

Making Love To Concrete

An upright abutment in the mouth
of the Willis Avenue bridge
a beige Honda leaps the divider
like a steel gazelle inescapable
sleek leather boots on the pavement
rat-a-tat-tat best intentions
going down for the third time
stuck in the particular

You cannot make love to concrete
if you care about being
non-essential wrong or worn thin
if you fear ever becoming
diamonds or lard
you cannot make love to concrete
if you cannot pretend
concrete needs your loving

To make love to concrete
you need an indelible feather
white dresses before you are ten
a confirmation lace veil milk-large bones
and air raid drills in your nightmares
no stars till you go to the country
and one summer when you are twelve
Con Edison pulls the plug
on the street-corner moons Walpurgisnacht
and there are sudden new lights in the sky
stone chips that forget you need
to become a light rope a hammer
a repeatable bridge
garden-fresh broccoli two dozen dropped eggs
and a hint of you
caught up between my fingers
the lesson of a wooden beam
propped up on barrels
across a mined terrain

between forgiving too easily

and never giving at all.

Audre Lorde

Movement Song

I have studied the tight curls on the back of your neck
moving away from me
beyond anger or failure
your face in the evening schools of longing
through mornings of wish and ripen
we were always saying goodbye
in the blood in the bone over coffee
before dashing for elevators going
in opposite directions
without goodbyes.

Do not remember me as a bridge nor a roof
as the maker of legends
nor as a trap
door to that world
where black and white clericals
hang on the edge of beauty in five oclock elevators
twitching their shoulders to avoid other flesh
and now
there is someone to speak for them
moving away from me into tomorrows
morning of wish and ripen
your goodbye is a promise of lightning
in the last angels hand
unwelcome and warning
the sands have run out against us
we were rewarded by journeys
away from each other
into desire
into mornings alone
where excuse and endurance mingle
conceiving decision.
Do not remember me
as disaster
nor as the keeper of secrets
I am a fellow rider in the cattle cars
watching
you move slowly out of my bed
saying we cannot waste time

only ourselves.

Audre Lorde

Never To Dream Of Spiders

Time collapses between the lips of strangers
my days collapse into a hollow tube
soon implodes against now
like an iron wall
my eyes are blocked with rubble
a smear of perspectives
blurring each horizon
in the breathless precision of silence
one word is made.

Once the renegade flesh was gone
fall air lay against my face
sharp and blue as a needle
but the rain fell through October
and death lay a condemnation
within my blood.

The smell of your neck in August
a fine gold wire bejeweling war
all the rest lies
illusory as a farmhouse
on the other side of a valley
vanishing in the afternoon.

Day three day four day ten
the seventh step
a veiled door leading to my golden anniversary
flameproofed free-paper shredded
in the teeth of a pillaging dog
never to dream of spiders
and when they turned the hoses upon me
a burst of light.

Audre Lorde

Now

Woman power

is

Black power

is

Human power

is

alwasy feeling

my heart beats

as my eyes open

as my hands move

as my mouth speaks

I am

are you

Ready.

Audre Lorde

Power

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles
and my stomach
churns at the imagined taste while
my mouth splits into dry lips
without loyalty or reason
thirsting for the wetness of his blood
as it sinks into the whiteness
of the desert where I am lost
without imagery or magic
trying to make power out of hatred and destruction
trying to heal my dying son with kisses
only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

A policeman who shot down a ten year old in Queens
stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood
and a voice said "Die you little motherfucker" and
there are tapes to prove it. At his trial
this policeman said in his own defense
"I didn't notice the size nor nothing else
only the color". And
there are tapes to prove that, too.

Today that 37 year old white man
with 13 years of police forcing
was set free
by eleven white men who said they were satisfied
justice had been done
and one Black Woman who said
"They convinced me" meaning
they had dragged her 4'10" black Woman's frame

over the hot coals
of four centuries of white male approval
until she let go
the first real power she ever had
and lined her own womb with cement
to make a graveyard for our children.

I have not been able to touch the destruction
within me.

But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
and one day I will take my teenaged plug
and connect it to the nearest socket
raping an 85 year old white woman
who is somebody's mother
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
"Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are."

Audre Lorde

Recreation

Coming together
it is easier to work
after our bodies
meet
paper and pen
neither care nor profit
whether we write or not
but as your body moves
under my hands
charged and waiting
we cut the leash
you create me against your thighs
hilly with images
moving through our word countries
my body
writes into your flesh
the poem
you make of me.

Touching you I catch midnight
as moon fires set in my throat
I love you flesh into blossom
I made you
and take you made
into me.

Audre Lorde

Sisters In Arms

The edge of our bed was a wide grid
where your fifteen-year-old daughter was hanging
gut-sprung on police wheels
a cablegram nailed to the wood
next to a map of the Western Reserve
I could not return with you to bury the body
reconstruct your nightly cardboards
against the seeping Transvaal cold
I could not plant the other limpet mine
against a wall at the railroad station
nor carry either of your souls back from the river
in a calabash upon my head
so I bought you a ticket to Durban
on my American Express
and we lay together
in the first light of a new season.

Now clearing roughage from my autumn garden
cow sorrel overgrown rocket gone to seed
I reach for the taste of today
the New York Times finally mentions your country
a half-page story
of the first white south african killed in the "unrest"
Not of Black children massacred at Sebokeng
six-year-olds imprisoned for threatening the state
not of Thabo Sibeko, first grader, in his own blood
on his grandmother's parlor floor
Joyce, nine, trying to crawl to him
shitting through her navel
not of a three-week-old infant, nameless
lost under the burned beds of Tembisa
my hand comes down like a brown vise over the marigolds
reckless through despair
we were two Black women touching our flame
and we left our dead behind us
I hovered you rose the last ritual of healing
"It is spring," you whispered
"I sold the ticket for guns and sulfa
I leave for home tomorrow"

and wherever I touch you
I lick cold from my fingers
taste rage
like salt from the lips of a woman
who has killed too often to forget
and carries each death in her eyes
your mouth a parting orchid
"Someday you will come to my country
and we will fight side by side?"

Keys jingle in the door ajar threatening
whatever is coming belongs here
I reach for your sweetness
but silence explodes like a pregnant belly
into my face
a vomit of nevers.

Mmanthatisi turns away from the cloth
her daughters-in-law are dyeing
the baby drools milk from her breast
she hands him half-asleep to his sister
dresses again for war
knowing the men will follow.
In the intricate Maseru twilights
quick sad vital
she maps the next day's battle
dreams of Durban sometimes
visions the deep wry song of beach pebbles
running after the sea.

Audre Lorde

The American Cancer Society Or There Is More Than One Way to Skin a Coon

Of all the ways in which this country
Prints its death upon me
Selling me cigarettes is one of the most certain.
Yet every day I watch my son digging
ConEdison GeneralMotors GarbageDisposal
Out of his nose as he watches a 3 second spot
On How To Stop Smoking
And it makes me sick to my stomach.
For it is not by cigarettes
That you intend to destroy my children.

Not even by the cold white light of moon-walks
While half the boys I knew
Are doomed to quicker trips by a different capsule;
No, the american cancer destroys
By seductive and reluctant admission
For instance
Black women no longer give birth through their ears
And therefore must have A Monthly Need For Iron:
For instance
Our Pearly teeth are not racially insured
And therefore must be Gleemed For Fewer Cavities:
For instance
Even though all astronauts are white
Perhaps Black People can develop
Some of those human attributes
Requiring
Dried dog food frozen coffee instant oatmeal
Depilatories deodorants detergents
And other assorted plastic.

And this is the surest sign I know
That the american cancer society is dying- -
It has started to dump its symbols onto Black People
Convincing proof that those symbols are now useless
And far more lethal than emphysema.

The Electric Slide Boogie

New Year's Day 1:16 AM
and my body is weary beyond
time to withdraw and rest
ample room allowed me in everyone's head
but community calls
right over the threshold
drums beating through the walls
children playing their truck dramas
under the collapsible coatrack
in the narrow hallway outside my room

The TV lounge next door is wide open
it is midnight in Idaho
and the throb easy subtle spin
of the electric slide boogie
step-stepping
around the corner of the parlor
past the sweet clink
of dining room glasses
and the edged aroma of slightly overdone
dutch-apple pie
all laced together
with the rich dark laughter
of Gloria
and her higher-octave sisters

How hard it is to sleep
in the middle of life.

Audre Lorde

Who Said It Was Simple

There are so many roots to the tree of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks
the women rally before they march
discussing the problematic girls
they hire to make them free.
An almost white counterman passes
a waiting brother to serve them first
and the ladies neither notice nor reject
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.
But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in colour
as well as sex

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.
Audre Lorde, "Who Said It Wa

Audre Lorde