

Audre Lorde -- 1934-1992



Photo by Leigh Mosley

Audre Lorde often identified herself as a Black lesbian feminist warrior poet mother. A prolific author and activist, she wrote groundbreaking poems and essays on racial identity, political consciousness and connections between Afro-European, Afro-Asian, and Afro-American women whom she called “the hyphenated people.” She was the daughter of Grenadian parents.

Her work carried themes of the need for love and commitment in our lives, interconnectedness,

“Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister/Outsider*, Crossing Press, 1984, p.37; first published in *Chrysalis* in 1977.

For women, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.

“The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” delivered at the Modern Language Association, Chicago, December 1977,

published in *Sister/Outsider*, pp.40-41.

I have to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. The speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive. Less than two months ago I was told by two doctors, one female and one male, that I would have to have breast surgery, and that there was a 60 to 80 percent chance that the tumor was malignant. Between that telling and the actual surgery, there was a three-week period of the

agony of an involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign.

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had

***"My silences had not protected me.
Your silences will not protect you."***

difference as a creative force, the South African struggle, the beauty and love of women, the pain and compassion of Black mothers and the encouragement of the voices of lesbians and women of color.

Lorde published nine volumes of poetry and five of prose, and contributed writings to numerous periodicals and anthologies. Her works have been translated into many languages. They include: *The Black Unicorn*, *Sister Outsider*, *Zami*:

A New Spelling of My Name, *Coal between Ourselves*, *The Cancer Journals*, *A Burst of Light* and *Undersong*.

She taught college students, organized among women of color, and politicized audiences with her poetry readings. In 1980, she helped found Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. She lived the last years of her life in St. Croix, Virgin Islands.

On November 17, 1992 Audre Lorde died after a long term bout with cancer.

ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you.

Sister/Outsider

Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.

There are many kinds of

power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

A Burst of Light, Firebrand Books, 1988, p.130.

For me, living fully means living with maximum access to my expe-

rience and power, loving, and doing work in which I believe. It means writing my poems, telling mystories, and speaking out of my most urgent concerns and against the many forms of anti-life that surround us.

I wish to live whatever life I have as fully and as sweetly as possible, rather than refocus that life solely upon extending it for some unspecified time. I consider this a political decision as well as life-saving one, and it is a decision that I am fortunate to be able to make.

If one Black woman I do not know gains hope and strength from my story, then it has been worth the difficulty of telling.

Meet

by Audre Lorde

Woman when we met on the solstice
high over halfway between your world and mine
rimmed with full moon and no more excuses
your red hair burned my fingers as I spread you
tasting your ruff down to sweetness
and I forgot to tell you
I have heard you calling across this land
in my blood before meeting
and I greet you again
on the beaches in mines lying platforms
in trees full of tail-tail birds flicking
and deep in your caves of decomposed granite
even over my own laterite hills
after a long journey
licking your sons
while you wrinkle your nose at the stench.

Coming to rest
in open mirrors of your demanded body
I will be black light as you lie against me
I will be heavy as August over your hair
our rivers flow from the same sea
and I promise to leave you again
full of amazement and our illuminations
dealt through the short tongues of color
or the taste of each other's skin when it hung
from our childhood mouths.

When we meet again
will you put your hands upon me
will I ride you over our lands
will we sleep beneath trees in the rain?
You shall get young as I lick your stomach
hot and at rest before we move off again



you will be white fury in my navel
I will be sweeping night
Mawulisa foretells our bodies
as our hands touch and learn
from each others hurt.
Taste my milk in the ditches of Chile and
Ouagadougou
in Tema's bright port while the priestess of
Larteh protects us
in the high meat stalls of Palmyra and Abomey-
Calavi
now you are my child and my mother
we have always been sisters in pain.
Come in the curve of the Lion's bulging stomach
lie for a season out of the judging rain
we have mated we have cubbed
we have high time for work and another meeting
women exchanging blood
in the innermost rooms of moment
we must taste of each other's fruit
at least once
before we shall both be slain.

Meet was first printed in **Sinister Wisdom**, #3, 1977 and reprinted in **The Black Unicorn** (1978, W.W. Norton, N.Y., U.S.A.)