

**a litany for survival:: audre lorde**

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, *The Black Unicorn*

**between ourselves :: audre lorde**

Once when I walked into a room  
my eyes would seek out the one or two black faces  
for contact or reassurance or a sign  
I was not alone  
now walking into rooms full of Black faces  
that would destroy me for any difference  
where shall my eyes look?  
Once it was easy to know  
who were my people.

If we were stripped of all pretense  
to our strength  
and our flesh was cut away  
the sun would bleach all our bones  
as white  
as the fact of my black mother  
was bleached white by gold  
or Orishala  
and how  
does that measure me?

I do not believe  
our wants have made all our lies  
holy.

Under the sun on the shores of Elmina  
a black man sold the woman who carried  
my grandmother in her belly  
he was paid with bright yellow coins  
that shone in the evening sun  
and in the faces of her sons and daughters.  
When I see that brother behind my eyes  
his irises are bloodless and without color  
his tongue clicks like yellow coins  
tossed up on his shore  
where we share the same corner  
of an alien and corrupted heaven  
and whenever I try to eat  
the words  
of easy blackness as salvation  
I taste the color  
of my grandmother's first betrayal.

I do not believe  
our wants  
have made all our lies holy.

But I do not whistle his name at the shrine of Shopana  
I do not bring down the rosy juices of death upon him  
nor forget Orishala

is called the god of whiteness  
who works in the dark wombs of night  
forming the shapes we all wear  
so that even the cripples and dwarfs and albinos  
are sacred worshipers  
when the boiled corn is offered.

Humility lies  
in the face of history  
I have forgiven myself  
for him  
for the white meat  
we all consumed in secret  
before we were born  
we shared the same meal  
when you impale me  
upon your lances of narrow blackness  
before you hear my heart speak  
mourn your own borrowed blood  
your own borrowed visions.

Do not mistake my flesh for the enemy  
do not write my name in the dust  
before the shrine of the god of smallpox  
for we are all children of Eshu  
god of chance and unpredictable  
and we each wear many changes  
inside our skin.

Armed with scars  
healed  
in many different colors  
I look in my own faces  
as Eshu's daughter crying  
if we do not stop killing  
the other in ourselves  
the self that we hate  
in others  
soon we shall all lie  
in the same direction  
and Eshidale's priests will be very busy  
they who alone can bury  
all those who seek their own death  
by jumping up from the ground  
and landing upon their heads.

**the brown menace, or poem to the survival of roaches:: audre lorde**

Call me  
your deepest urge  
toward survival  
call me  
and my brothers and sisters  
in the sharp smell of your refusal  
call me  
roach and presumptuous  
nightmare on your white pillow  
your itch to destroy  
the indestructible  
part of yourself.

Call me your own determination  
in the most detestable shape  
you can become  
friend of your image  
within me  
I am you  
in your most deeply cherished nightmare  
scuttling through the painted cracks  
you create to admit me  
into your kitchens  
into your fearful midnights  
into your values at noon  
in your most secret places  
with hate  
you learn to honor me  
by imitation  
as I alter--  
although your greedy preoccupations  
through your kitchen wars  
and your poisonous refusal--  
to survive.

To survive.  
Survive.

## afterimages: audre lorde

### 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.

**who said it was simple: audre lorde**

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.