

work calls on the deepest places of her own life—on the pain she experienced, on her rage (her second book, in 1972, was titled *Cables to Rage*), on her longing and desire. One of the silences her poems broke concerns love between women, and she wrote a number of poems that are erotic, precise, and true to both the power and delicacy of feeling. Unafraid of anger, she was also capable of tenderness; this is perhaps most clear not only in her love poems but in poems that address a younger generation.

Lorde was born in New York City and lived in New York almost all her life. Her parents were West Indian, and her mother was light skinned. “I grew up in a genuine confusion / between grass and weeds and flowers / and what colored meant,” Lorde wrote in her poem “Outside.” Part of that confusion was the conflict represented by her father’s blackness and her mother’s desire for whiteness (in “Black Mother Woman” Lorde speaks of the mother as “split with deceitful longings”). Lorde’s understanding of identity forged out of conflict began for her, then, in her own family history with its legacy of “conflicting rebellions” (“Black Mother Woman”). In 1961 she received a B.A. from Hunter College and later a Master’s of Library Science from Columbia University. The following year she married and the marriage produced a daughter and a son (she divorced in 1970). In 1968 she became poet-in-residence for a year at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, her first experience in the American South. Thereafter she knew her work to be that of a writer and teacher; she taught at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City and, from 1981, was professor of English at Hunter College. In the last years of her life Lorde traveled extensively, not only to Africa but to Australia (where she met with aborigine women) and Germany. During her last years she lived much of the time in St. Croix.

“I have come to believe over and over again,” Lorde said, “that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.” (Her essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” [1977] makes the case for poetry’s essential speaking of what is otherwise unnamed and unthought. A selection from this essay appears in the “Postmodern Manifestos” cluster of this anthology.) The drive toward expression made Lorde a prolific writer and led her to compose several prose works in which she shared experiences often restricted to privacy: *The Cancer Journals* (1980), an account of her struggle with breast cancer, and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), a “biomythography” of her growing up and her emergent lesbian identity. The urgency Lorde felt to make experience “verbal and shared,” however, sometimes overrode a distinction crucial to her work: that between poetry and rhetoric. She preserved this distinction in her best work by listening and responding to other voices in herself and in the world around her. With their combination of pain, anger, and tenderness, her finest poems are poetry as illumination, poetry in which, as she said, “we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless, formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.”

Coal

I
 is the total black, being spoken
 from the earth’s inside.
 There are many kinds of open
 how a diamond comes into a knot of flame
 how sound comes into a word, coloured
 by who pays what for speaking.

5

Some words are open like a diamond
 on glass windows

singing out within the passing crash of sun 10
 Then there are words like stapled wagers
 in a perforated book,—buy and sign and tear apart—
 and come whatever wills all chances
 the stub remains
 an ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge. 15
 Some words live in my throat
 breeding like adders. Others know sun
 seeking like gypsies over my tongue
 to explode through my lips
 like young sparrows bursting from shell. 20
 Some words
 bedevil me.

Love is a word, another kind of open.
 As the diamond comes into a knot of flame
 I am Black because I come from the earth's inside 25
 now take my word for jewel in the open light.

1968

The Woman Thing

The hunters are back from beating the winter's face
 in search of a challenge or task
 in search of food
 making fresh tracks for their children's hunger
 they do not watch the sun 5
 they cannot wear its heat for a sign
 of triumph or freedom;
 The hunters are treading heavily homeward
 through snow that is marked
 with their own bloody footprints. 10
 emptyhanded, the hunters return
 snow-maddened, sustained by their rages.

In the night after food they may seek
 young girls for their amusement. But now
 the hunters are coming 15
 and the unbaked girls flee from their angers.
 All this day I have craved
 food for my child's hunger
 Emptyhanded the hunters come shouting
 injustices drip from their mouths 20
 like stale snow melted in sunlight.

Meanwhile
 the woman thing my mother taught me
 bakes off its covering of snow
 like a rising blackening sun. 25

1968