

AUDRE LORDE

As a black feminist, lesbian, poet, cancer survivor, and social activist, Audre Lorde (1934–1992) felt compelled to respond to the frequent assertion among activists that writing poetry is a luxury. Her essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” originally appeared in *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture* in 1977 and was reprinted in her well-known collection of essays, *Sister, Outsider* (1989). Lorde argued that, rather than being a luxury, poetry is “a vital necessity” because it creates a language in which to express women’s hopes and dreams. The writing process, as she describes it, gives life and voice to what is unnamed and as yet unthought, and thus overcomes the forces in society that silence women’s experiences. In this sense poetry articulates the vision necessary for social change to occur. Lorde’s life and work reflected her belief that poetry is a form of empowerment and a tool for survival. A selection of her poems can be found elsewhere in this anthology.

From Poetry Is Not a Luxury

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the 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 farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known and accepted to ourselves, our feelings, and the honest exploration of them, become sanctuaries and fortresses and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas, the house of difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would once have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but the true meaning of “It feels right to me.” We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that catches those feelings so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.

1977

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