

## Prologue

Haunted by poems beginning with I  
seek out those whom I love who are deaf  
to whatever does not destroy  
or curse the old ways that did not serve us  
while history falters and our poets are dying  
choked into silence by icy distinction  
death rattles blind curses  
and I hear even my own voice becoming  
a pale strident whisper  
At night sleep locks me into an echoless coffin  
sometimes at noon I dream  
there is nothing to fear  
now standing up in the light of my father sun  
without shadow  
I speak without concern for the accusations  
that I am too much or too little woman  
that I am too Black or too white  
or too much myself  
and through my lips comes the voices  
of the ghosts of our ancestors  
living and moving among us.

Hear my heart's voice as it darkens  
pulling old rhythms out of the earth  
that will receive this piece of me  
and a piece of each one of you  
when our part in history quickens again  
and is over:

Hear  
the old ways are going away  
and coming back pretending change  
masked as denunciation and lament  
masked as a choice  
between an eager mirror that blurs and distorts us  
in easy definitions until our image  
shatters along its fault  
or the other half of that choice  
speaking to our hidden fears with a promise  
our eyes need not seek any truer shape-  
a face at high noon particular and unadorned-  
for we have learned to fear  
the light from clear water might destroy us

with reflected emptiness or a face without tongue  
with no love or with terrible penalties  
for any difference  
and even as I speak remembered pain is moving  
shadows over my face, my own voice fades and  
my brothers and sisters are leaving;

Yet when I was a child  
whatever my mother thought would mean survival  
made her try to beat me whiter every day  
and even now the color of her bleached ambition  
still forks throughout my words  
but I survived  
and didn't I survive confirmed  
to teach my children where her errors lay  
etched across their faces between the kisses  
that she pinned me with asleep  
and my mother beating me  
as white as snow melts in the sunlight  
loving me into her bloods black bone-  
the home of all her secret hopes and fears  
and my dead father whose great hands  
weakened in my judgment  
whose image broke inside of me  
beneath the weight of failure  
helps me to know who I am not  
weak or mistaken  
my father loved me alive  
to grow and hate him  
and now his grave voice joins hers  
within my words rising and falling  
are my sisters and brothers listening?

The children remain  
like blades of grass over the earth and  
all the children are singing  
louder than mourning  
all their different voices  
sound like a raucous question  
they do not live in fear of empty mirrors  
they have seen their faces defined in a hydrant's puddle  
before the rainbows of oil obscured them  
The time of lamentation and curses is passing.

My mother survives  
though more than chance or token.

Although she will read what I write  
with embarrassment or anger  
and a small understanding  
my children do not need to relive my past  
in strength nor in confusion  
nor care that their holy fires  
may destroy more than my failures.

Somewhere in the landscape past noon  
I shall leave a dark print of the me that I am  
and who I am not  
etched in a shadow  
of angry and remembered loving  
and their ghosts will move  
whispering through them  
with me none the wiser for they will have buried me  
either in shame  
or in peace.  
And the grasses will still be  
singing.

Audre Lorde