

August 2021

Poem: 1974 Audre Lorde “Blackstudies”

Audre Lorde

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Recommended Citation

Lorde, Audre (2021). Poem: 1974 Audre Lorde “Blackstudies”. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(8), 334-339.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss8/95>

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Blackstudies

Lorde, Audre . In The Collected Poems Of Audre Lorde , Lorde, Audre, 153-154. New York: 1997.

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FULL TEXT

I

- 1 A chill wind sweeps the high places.
- 2 On the ground I watch bearers of wood
- 3 carved in the image of old and mistaken gods
- 4 labour in search of weapons against the blind dancers
- 5 who balance great dolls on their shoulders
- 6 as they scramble over the same earth
- 7 searching for food.

- 8 In a room on the 17th floor my spirit is choosing
- 9 I am afraid of speaking
- 10 the truth
- 11 in a room on the 17th floor
- 12 my body is dreaming
- 13 it sits
- 14 bottom pinned to a table
- 15 eating perpetual watermelon inside my own head
- 16 while young girls assault my door
- 17 with curse rags
- 18 stiff with their mothers old secrets
- 19 covering up their new promise
- 20 with old desires no longer their need
- 21 with old satisfactions they never enjoyed
- 22 outside my door they are waiting
- 23 with questions that feel like judgements
- 24 when they are unanswered.

- 25 The palms of my hands have black marks running across them.
- 26 So are signed makers of myth
- 27 who are sworn through our blood to give
- 28 legend

29 children will come to understand
30 to speak out living words like this poem
31 that knits truth into fable
32 to leave my story behind
33 though I fall through cold wind condemned
34 to nursing old gods for a new heart
35 debtless and without colour
36 while my flesh is covered by mouths
37 whose noise keeps my real wants secret.

38 I do not want to lie. I have loved other
39 tall young women deep into their colour
40 who now crawl over a bleached earth
41 bent into questionmarks
42 ending a sentence of men
43 who pretended to be brave.
44 Even this
45 can be an idle defense
46 protecting the lies I am trying to reject.

47 I am afraid
48 that the mouths I feed will turn against me
49 will refuse to swallow in the silence
50 I am warning them to avoid
51 I am afraid
52 they will kernel me out like a walnut
53 extracting the nourishing seed
54 as my husk stains their lips
55 with the mixed colours of my pain.

56 While I sit choosing the voice
57 in which my children hear my prayers
58 above the wind
59 they will follow the black roads out of my hands
60 unencumbered by the weight of my remembered sorrows
61 by the weight of my remembered sorrows
62 they will use my legends to shape their own language
63 and make it ruler
64 measuring the distance between my hungers
65 and their own purpose.
66 I am afraid
67 They will discard my most ancient nightmares
68 where the fallen gods became demon
69 instead of dust.

II

70 Just before light devils woke me
71 trampling my flesh into fruit
72 that would burst in the sun
73 until I came to despise every evening
74 fearing a strange god at the fall of each night
75 and when my mother punished me
76 by sending me to bed without my prayers
77 I had no names for darkness.

78 I do not know whose words protected me
79 whose tales or tears prepared me
80 for this trial on the 17th floor
81 I do not know whose legends blew
82 through my mothers furies
83 but somehow they fell through my sleeping lips
84 like the juice of forbidden melons
85 and the little black seeds were sown
86 throughout my heart
87 like closed and waiting eyes
88 and although demons rode me
89 until I rose up a child of morning
90 deep roads sprouted over the palms
91 of my hidden fists
92 dark and growing.

III

93 Chill winds swirl around these high blank places.
94 It is the time when the bearer of hard news
95 is destroyed for the message
96 when it is heard.
97 A. B. is a poet who says our people
98 fear our own beauty
99 has not made us hard enough
100 to survive victory
101 but he too has written his children upon women
102 I hope with love.
103 I bear mine alone in the mouth of the enemy
104 upon a desk on the 17th floor
105 swept bare by cold winds
106 bright as neon.

IV

107 Their demon father rode me just before daylight
108 I learned his tongue as he reached
109 for my hands at dawn
110 before he could touch the palms of my hands
111 to devour my children
112 I learned his language
113 I ate him
114 and left his bones mute in the noon sun.

115 Now all the words in my legend come garbled
116 except anguish.
117 Visions of chitterlings I never ate
118 strangle me in a nightmare of leaders
119 at crowded meetings to study our problems
120 I move awkward and ladylike
121 through four centuries of unused bathtubs
122 that never smile
123 not even an apologetic grin
124 I worry on nationalist holidays
125 make a fetish of lateness
126 with limp unbelieving excuses
127 shunning the use of pronouns
128 as an indirect assault
129 what skin I have left
130 unbetrayed by scouring
131 uncovered by mouths that shriek
132 but do not speak my real wants
133 glistens and twinkles blinding all beholders
134 "But I just washed them, Mommy!"

135 Only the black marks on my hands itch and flutter
136 shredding my words and wherever they fall
137 the earth springs up denials
138 that I pay for
139 only the dark roads over my palms
140 wait for my voice
141 to follow.

V

142 The chill wind is beating down from the high places.
143 My students wait outside my door
144 searching condemning listening
145 for what I am sworn to tell them
146 for what they least want to hear

147 clogging the only exit from the 17th floor
148 begging in their garbled language
149 beyond judgement or understanding
150 "oh speak to us now mother for soon
151 we will not need you
152 only your memory
153 teaching us questions."

154 Stepping into my self
155 I open the door
156 and leap groundward
157 wondering
158 what shall they carve for weapons
159 what shall they grow for food.

DETAILS

Editor:	Lorde, Audre
Publication title:	The Collected Poems Of Audre Lorde
Pages:	153-154
Publication date:	1997
Publication year:	1997
Publisher/Imprint:	Norton
Physical description:	489 p.
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	New York
Series:	Literature Online - Twentieth-Century American Poetry - US ONLY Add-on, Literature Online - Twentieth-Century African American Poetry - US ONLY Add-on
Publication subject:	Literature
Source type:	Books
Language of publication:	English

ISBN: 978-0-393-04090-6

Document type: Book Chapter, Poem

Publication note: Preliminaries omitted.

Accession number: J3035563

ProQuest document ID: 2147553333

Document URL: <http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/books/blackstudies/docview/2147553333/se-2?accountid=10141>

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Database: Literature Online

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