



THE
BLACK UNICORN

POEMS BY **AUDRE LORDE**

W·W·NORTON & COMPANY·INC·NEW YORK

THE BLACK UNICORN is a collection of poems by a woman who, Adrienne Rich writes, "for the complexity of her vision, for her moral courage and the catalytic passion of her language, has already become, for many, an indispensable poet."

Rich continues: "Refusing to be circumscribed by any simple identity, Audre Lorde writes as a Black woman, a mother, a daughter, a Lesbian, a feminist, a visionary; poems of elemental wildness and healing, nightmare and lucidity. Her rhythms and accents have the timelessness of a poetry which extends beyond white Western politics, beyond the anger and wisdom of Black America, beyond the North American earth, to Abomey and the Dahomeyan Amazons. These are poems nourished in an oral tradition, which also blaze and pulse on the page, beneath the reader's eye."

Audre Lorde (1934–1992) published ten volumes of poetry and five works of prose. She was a recipient of many distinguished honors and awards, including the Honorary Doctorate of Literature, Hunter College (1991); Walt Whitman Citation of Merit (1991); Honorary Doctorate of Letters, Oberlin College (1990); Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, Haverford College (1989); and the Manhattan Borough President's Award for Excellence in the Arts (1988). She was also named the New York State Poet (1991–1993).

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THE BLACK UNICORN

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• •

THE BLACK UNICORN

The black unicorn is greedy.
The black unicorn is impatient.
The black unicorn was mistaken
for a shadow
or symbol
and taken
through a cold country
where mist painted mockeries
of my fury.
It is not on her lap where the horn rests
but deep in her moonpit
growing.

The black unicorn is restless
the black unicorn is unrelenting
the black unicorn is not
free.

• •
A WOMAN SPEAKS

Moon marked and touched by sun
my magic is unwritten
but when the sea turns back
it will leave my shape behind.
I seek no favor
untouched by blood
unrelenting as the curse of love
permanent as my errors
or my pride
I do not mix
love with pity
nor hate with scorn
and if you would know me
look into the entrails of Uranus
where the restless oceans pound.

I do not dwell
within my birth nor my divinities
who am ageless and half-grown
and still seeking
my sisters
witches in Dahomey
wear me inside their coiled cloths
as our mother did
mourning.

I have been woman
for a long time
beware my smile
I am treacherous with old magic
and the noon's new fury
with all your wide futures
promised
I am
woman
and not white.

• • •
FOG REPORT

In this misty place where hunger finds us
seeking direction
I am too close to you to be useful.
When I speak
the smell of love on my breath
distracts you
and it is easier for me
to move
against myself in you
than to solve my own equations.

I am often misled
by your familiar comforts
the shape of your teeth is written
into my palm like a second lifeline
when I am fingerprinted
the taste of your thighs
shows up
outlined in the ink.
They found me wandering at the edge
of a cliff
beside nightmares of your body
"Give us your name and place of birth
and we will show you the way home."

I am tempted
to take you apart
and reconstruct your orifices
your tongue your truths your fleshy altars
into my own forgotten image
so when this fog lifts
I could be sure to find you
tethered like a goat
in my heart's yard.

• • •
PATHWAYS: FROM
MOTHER TO MOTHER

Tadpoles are legless and never learn to curtsy
birds cannot pee
in spring
black snakes go crazy
bowing out of the presence of kings.
Digging beneath a river bed
whose heart is black and rosy
I find the sticky ooze I learned
rejecting all my angels.
It puzzled my unborn children
and they paused in my frightened womb
a decade or two long
breaking apart what was begun
as marriage. My mother wept.
Fleshy lemmings dropped like corn
into her hopper
popping as they hit the water
and hungry tadpoles
winnowed up my falls.

Wherever she wore ivory
I wear pain.

Imprisoned in the pews of memory
beneath the scarlet velvet
is a smile. My mother
weeping
gouts of bloody wisdom
pewed oracular and seminal as rape
pursues me through the nightmares
of this wonderland of early learning
where I wander cryptic as a saint
tightmouthed as cuttlefish

darting beneath and over
vital flaws unstitched like crazy patchwork
until analyzed and useless I
crest in a shoal of missing mummies
paid and made in beds of consecration
worshiped by rituals in which
I do not believe
nor find a place to kneel and rest
out of the storm of strangers and demands
drowning in flooded churches
thick with rot and swollen with confusion
lashed to a raft of grins aligned in an enemy reason
I refuse to learn again.

Item: birds cannot pee
and so they shat upon our heads
while we learned how
to bow
out
of the presence of kings.

* * *

DEATH DANCE FOR A POET

Hidden in a forest of questions
unwilling to embrace blackthorn trees
to yield
to go into madness gracefully
or alone
the woman is no longer young
she has come to hate slowly
her skin of transparent metal
the sinuous exposure without reprieve
her eyes of clay
heavy with the fruit of prophetic dreaming.

In the hungers of silence
she has stolen her father's judgments
as the moon kneels
she lies
with her lover sun
wild with the pain
of her meticulous chemistry
her blind answers
the woman is eating her magic alone
crusts of quiet
breed a delusion
she is eternal
and stripping herself of night
she wanders
pretending
a borrowed fire
within her eyes.

Under the myrtle tree
unconcerned with not being
a birch
the woman with skin of transparent metal

lies on a cloak of sleep grass
closing at the first touch
unrelieved
clay-eyed and holy beyond comfort or mercy
she accepts the burden of sun
pouring a pan of burning salt
over her shining body
over the piercing revelations
of sinew and bone
her skin grows
soft and opaque.

And out of the ashes
and her range of vision
the executioners advance.

♦ ♦ ♦
DREAM/SONGS FROM
THE MOON OF BEULAH LAND
I-V

I.

How much love can I pour into you I said
before it runs out of you
like undigested spinach
or shall I stuff you
like a ritual goose
with whatever you think
you want of me
and for whose killing
shall I grow you up
to leave me
to mourn
in the broken potsherds
upon my doorstep
in silent tears of the empty morning?

But I'm not going anywhere you said
why is there always
another question
beyond the last question
answered
out of your mouth
another storm?
It's happening
I said.

II.

Whenever I look for you the wind
howls with danger
beware the tree arms scream
what you are seeking
will find you
in the night
in the fist of your dreaming
and in my mouth
the words became sabers
cutting my boundaries
to ribbons
of merciless light.

III.

I dreamt you were driving me
in a big black Mazda
the car with a rotary engine
that ate up three kinds of gas at the same time
and whenever we came
to a station upon our journey
I would have to jump out
and explain
to the redfaced attendant
with a panting hose in his hand
that each kind of gas
gave us very different mileage
and we needed them all
for the combined use of all three
would get us to where we were going
with a great economy
of energy.

V.

Learning to say goodbye
is finding a new tomorrow
on some cooler planet
barren and unfamiliar
and guiltless.

It costs the journey
to learn
letting go
of the burn-out rockets
to learn how
to light up space
with the quick fire of refusal
then drift gently down
to the dead surface
of the moon.

* * *

RECREATION

Coming together
it is easier to work
after our bodies
meet
paper and pen
neither care nor profit
whether we write or not
but as your body moves
under my hands
charged and waiting
we cut the leash
you create me against your thighs
hilly with images
moving through our word countries
my body
writes into your flesh
the poem
you make of me.

Touching you I catch midnight
as moon fires set in my throat
I love you flesh into blossom
I made you
and take you made
into me.

• •

WOMAN

I dream of a place between your breasts
to build my house like a haven
where I plant crops
in your body
an endless harvest
where the commonest rock
is moonstone and ebony opal
giving milk to all of my hungers
and your night comes down upon me
like a nurturing rain.

• •

TIMING

In our infancy of action we were women of peace
come to service islands with no bridges in sight
in the beginning we all dreamed of an ending
but the wars of our childhood have aged us.

When donations of soup from my yesterday's kitchen
sour in the stomachs of beggars now miles away
and they toss in their sleep in doorways
with a curse of worry upon their lips
then even my good deeds are suspect
fulfillments of dreams of the dead
printing so many starvations
upon our future.

While we labor to feed the living
beware the spirit of the uneasy dead
who trap us into believing
in the too simple.

Our childhood wars have aged us
but it is the absence of change
which will destroy us
which has crippled our harvest into nightmare
of endless plowing through fields rank with death
while the carcasses of 4 million blackbirds
frozen to death because their chatter
insulted the generals
escape in the back pages
like the three black girls
hailed into an empty hurried courtroom
to point fingers at their mother—
I was cooking peasoup while they murmured—
"Yes, Mommy told us that she'd killed him
in front of many strangers she told us
yes he was a white man, may we go now?"

And their eyes look like old women who sleep
in the curve of neon doorways under newspaper
clutching a can of petfood for tomorrow's meal.

Sisters there is a hole in my heart
that is bearing your shapes
over and over
as I read only the headlines
of this morning's newspaper.

••

GHOST

Since I don't want to trip over your silence
over the gap that is you
in my dark
I will deal how it feels
with you
climbing another impossible mountain
with you gone
away a long time ago.

I don't want my life to be woven or chosen
from pain I am concealing
from fractions of myself
from your voice crying out in your sleep
to another woman
come play in the snow love
but this is not the same winter.

That was our first season of cold
I counted the patterned snowflakes
of love melting into ice
concealing our dreams of separation
I could not bear to write
our names on the mailbox
I could not bear to tell you my dreams
nor to question yours
now this poem
makes those mornings real again.

"You were always real" Bernice is saying
but I see the scars of her pain

hidden beneath the flesh on her cheekbones
and I do not know how many years I spent
trying to forget you
but I am afraid to think
how many years I will spend
trying to remember.

• •
ARTISAN

In workshops without light
we have made birds
that do not sing
kites that shine
but cannot fly
with the speed
by which light falls
in the throat
of delicate working fire
I thought I had discovered
a survival kit
buried
in the moon's heart
flat and resilient as turtles
a case of tortoise shell
hung
in the mouth of darkness
precise unlikely markings
carved into the carapace
sweet meat beneath.

I did not recognize
the shape
of my own name.

Our bed spread
is a midnight flower
coming
all the way down
to the floor
there
your craft shows.