

WHAT KIND OF TIMES ARE THESE

Adrienne Rich

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.

I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but don't be fooled
this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light —
ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it's necessary
to talk about trees.

Poetry Is Not a Luxury (1985)

Audre Lorde

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny, and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, "Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against our nightmare of weakness" and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

When we view living, in the european mode, only as a problem to be solved, we then rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious.

But as we become more in touch with our own ancient, black, non-european view of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and therefore lasting action comes.

At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches as keystone for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean — in order to cover their desperate wish for imagination without insight.

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 have once 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 matches 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.

Possibility is neither forever nor instant. It is also not easy to sustain belief in its efficacy. We can sometimes work long and hard to establish one beachhead of real resistance to the deaths we are expected to live, only to have that beachhead assaulted or threatened by canards we have been socialized to fear, or by the withdrawal of those approvals that we have been warned to seek for safety. We see ourselves diminished or softened by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of non-universality, of self-centeredness, of sensuality. And who asks the question: am I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams, or am I merely moving you to temporary and reactive action? (Even the latter is no mean task, but one that must be rather seen within the context of a true alteration of the texture of our lives.)

The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us-the poet-whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand, the implementation of that freedom. However, experience has taught us that the action in the now is also always necessary. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours?

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves, along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions our dreams imply and some of our old ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only our poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.

For within structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were meant to kneel to thought as we were meant to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They lie in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. They are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare.

If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is a luxury, then we have given up the core-the fountain-of our power, our

womanness; we have give up the future of our worlds.

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of examining what our ideas really mean (feel like) on Sunday morning at 7 AM, after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth; while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while tasting our new possibilities and strengths.

TO THOSE WHO FOLLOW IN OUR WAKE

Bertolt Brecht

I

Truly, I live in dark times!

An artless word is foolish. A smooth forehead

Points to insensitivity. He who laughs

Has not yet received

The terrible news.

What times are these, in which

A conversation about trees is almost a crime

For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!

And he who walks quietly across the street,

Passes out of the reach of his friends

Who are in danger?

It is true: I work for a living

But, believe me, that is a coincidence. Nothing

That I do gives me the right to eat my fill.

By chance I have been spared. (If my luck does not hold,

I am lost.)

They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad to be among the haves!

But how can I eat and drink

When I take what I eat from the starving

And those who thirst do not have my glass of water?

And yet I eat and drink.

I would happily be wise.

The old books teach us what wisdom is:

To retreat from the strife of the world

To live out the brief time that is your lot

Without fear

To make your way without violence

To repay evil with good —

The wise do not seek to satisfy their desires,

But to forget them.

But I cannot heed this:

Truly I live in dark times!

II

I came into the cities in a time of disorder
As hunger reigned.

I came among men in a time of turmoil
And I rose up with them.

And so passed

The time given to me on earth.

I ate my food between slaughters.

I laid down to sleep among murderers.

I tended to love with abandon.

I looked upon nature with impatience.

And so passed

The time given to me on earth.

In my time streets led into a swamp.

My language betrayed me to the slaughterer.

There was little I could do. But without me

The rulers sat more securely, or so I hoped.

And so passed

The time given to me on earth.

The powers were so limited. The goal

Lay far in the distance

It could clearly be seen although even I

Could hardly hope to reach it.

And so passed

The time given to me on earth.

III

You, who shall resurface following the flood

In which we have perished,

Contemplate —

When you speak of our weaknesses,

Also the dark time

That you have escaped.

For we went forth, changing our country more frequently than our shoes

Through the class warfare, despairing

That there was only injustice and no outrage.

And yet we knew:

Even the hatred of squalor
Distorts one's features.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow hoarse. We
Who wished to lay the foundation for gentleness
Could not ourselves be gentle.
But you, when at last the time comes
That man can aid his fellow man,
Should think upon us
With leniency.

A BRAVE AND STARTLING TRUTH

Maya Angelou

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we learn
A brave and startling truth
And when we come to it
To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers
From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms
When we come to it
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate
And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean
When battlefields and coliseum
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters
Up with the bruised and bloody grass
To lie in identical plots in foreign soil
When the rapacious storming of the churches
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased
When the pennants are waving gaily
When the banners of the world tremble
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze
When we come to it
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders

And children dress their dolls in flags of truce
When land mines of death have been removed
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace
When religious ritual is not perfumed
By the incense of burning flesh
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake
By nightmares of abuse
When we come to it
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids
With their stones set in mysterious perfection
Nor the Gardens of Babylon
Hanging as eternal beauty
In our collective memory
Not the Grand Canyon
Kindled into delicious color
By Western sunsets
Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji
Stretching to the Rising Sun
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores
These are not the only wonders of the world
When we come to it
We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace
We, this people on this mote of matter
In whose mouths abide cankerous words

Which challenge our very existence
Yet out of those same mouths
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness
That the heart falters in its labor
And the body is quieted into awe
We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines
When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear
When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.