

Preface to a New Edition of
Need:
A Chorale For Black Woman Voices

This revised version of *Need: A Chorale For Black Woman Voices* is created for particular use in classes, small community meetings, families, churches, and discussion groups, to open a dialogue between and among Black women and Black men on the subject of violence against women within our communities. Alterations in the text since the poem was originally published are a result of hearing the poem read aloud several times by groups of women.

Need was first written in 1979 after 12 Black women were killed in the Boston area within four months. In a grassroots movement spearheaded by Black and Latina Lesbians, Women of Color in the area rallied: Lesbian and straight, in coalitions and churches and c.r. groups. Coming together with each other and their families and their friends, and their enemies, too—wherever—they launched a support/outrage/information campaign. My lasting image of that spring, beyond the sick sadness and anger and worry, was of women whom I knew, loved, and trembled for: Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, Margot Okazawa-Rey, and women whose names were unknown to me, leading a march through the streets of Boston behind a broad banner stitched with a line from Barbara Denning: "WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT OUR LIVES."

I wrote *Need: A Chorale For Black Woman Voices* because I felt I had to use the intensity of fury, frustration and fear I was feeling to create something that could help alter the reasons for what I felt. Someone had to speak, beyond these events and this time, yet out of their terrible immediacy, to the repeated fact of the blood of Black women flowing through the streets of our communities—so often shed by our brothers, and so often without comment or note. Or worse, having that blood justified or explained away by those horrific effects of racism which we share as Black people.

When last have you seen an article on the front page—on any page—of your daily newspaper about the Black woman found dead, raped,

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Cover and text design by Ann Cammett.
Typesetting by Communication Services, Albany, NY

Illustrations for text and cover designs are from *Between Our Selves* by Audre Lorde, published by Eidolon Editions, Point Reyes, CA, 1976.

An earlier version of "Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices" appeared in *Chosen Poems, Old and New*, by Audre Lorde. It is reprinted with the permission of W. W. Norton & Co. Inc. Copyright © 1982, 1976, 1974, 1973, 1970, 1968 by Audre Lorde.

First Edition. First Printing.

ISBN 0-913175-22-6

beaten, stomped, burned or poisoned around the corner from where you live?

As I began writing the poem, there flooded through me all the pain and waste of the Black women's deaths that I had read and heard about in the previous months during my travels and how if we were to progress as Black people, we could no longer hide this womanslaughter behind the smoke-screen of nation-building. For we cannot build a Black nation upon the blood of Black women and children, without all of us, men and women, being the losers as Black people. It is as simple and as complex and as terrible as that.

And of course I was terrified. Of attack from my sisters and brothers for telling tales out of school. Of my sisters, who, out of their own fear and vulnerability, might betray me. Terrified of my brothers' anger, of being called traitor, of being accused of giving weapons to the enemy. But I knew that no weapon is so terrible as the ones we use against each other, and that Black women and men had to start speaking to each other and to our children about this wasteful expression of violence, or we would all be lost.

I wrote this poem in 1979 as an organizing tool, as a jump-off point for other pieces on the theme, and for discussion among and between Black women and men. I wrote this poem for each one of the 12 women dead in Boston that cold, bleak January. I wrote it for every face in that march, those I knew and those I did not know. I wrote it for Patricia Cowan, murdered in Detroit four months before. I wrote it for Martha, my neighbors' sweet-faced daughter, first one in her family to graduate high school, shot to death in her own bed.

I wrote it for the three little girls, victims in the Atlanta Murders, whose names are never spoken.

I wrote it for every Black woman who has ever bled at the hands of a brother.

I wrote it for every brother who has ever hung his head and wept in stunned silence after the fact, wondering whatever had possessed him.

I wrote it for my son, and my daughter.

I wrote it because I wanted to talk about Black womanslaughter in a way that could not be unfelt or ignored by any Black person who heard it, with a hope perhaps of each one of us doing something within our immediate living to change this destruction.

I wrote it for every Black woman to read aloud whenever she needed. I wrote it for me.

I also wrote *Need: A Chorale For Black Woman Voices* for the Black man who came up to me in Rutgers, New Jersey, after the first time I read it, with tears in his eyes, saying how glad he was to have heard it. And I wrote it for the young brother who shook his fist at me as he walked out of my reading that same year in Detroit yelling, "You're a dangerous woman!"

Not enough has changed since then.

-> In 1985 I had a dialogue with James Baldwin at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, not far from Boston. One of the most heated discussions was around the issue of the 12 murdered Black women, and sexual violence and assault against Black women in general within our Black communities. There were present two other Black women, two other Black men, one white man, and a young Black male student. Jimmy and one of the older Black men were in agreement that under the tremendous pressures of racism, Black men could not be held responsible for their violence against Black women, since it was a response to an unjust system, and Black women were only incidental victims. One of the Black men went so far as to say:

"The Black male is not attacking a Black female; it would be a sheep if that's what was there . . ." To this I replied, and still reply:

"Yes, but I'm not a sheep, I'm your sister . . . who is learning to use a gun. If we wind up having to kill each other instead of our enemies, what a terrible waste for us all." ←

And at this point it was the young Black male student in the room who spoke up to the older men, in defense of his mother and sisters and their right to defend themselves in the street. I want that young man to know he was a genuine affirmation for me, and that I wrote *Need: A Chorale For Black Woman Voices* for him, too.

As aggressive acts of white racist violence intensify around us, aimed primarily but not exclusively at Black males, (remember Eleanor Bumpurs and Yvonne Smallwood)'s violence against Black women, both reported and unreported, intensifies within our communities. It is time to pump up the volume again around this wasteful secret and not hide from it under a cloak of false unity, not turn away from it, believing it will be solved by somebody else.

Black women will no longer accept being slaughtered like sheep

on the altars of Black-male frustration. On the other hand, we do not want to have to blow away Black men in our own self-defense. So Black women and men must devise ways of working together as a people to end this slaughter. We need each other too much to be destroying each other. We need each other too much, genuinely, as Black people unafraid of each other.

Each one of us can have some input into the lives of young Black boys who are part of our future. Each one of us has a voice that can be heard, and that voice must be used. Every Black person in this country is responsible in some way for teaching our sons that their manhood cannot lie within a pool of Black women's blood.

And increasingly, there are Black male voices being raised with this lesson. In an extremely thorough and considered study of rape in Black communities, Kalamu ya Salaam noted, ". . . [Black] women revolting and [Black] men made conscious of their responsibility to fight sexism will collectively stop rape."²

We need to talk about what we do to each other, no matter what pain and anger may be mined within those conversations. This poem is as good a place as any to begin. We are too important to each other to waste ourselves in silence.

"WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT OUR LIVES;"

Audre Lorde

St. Croix

August 31, 1989

Notes

¹ Eleanor Bumpurs, 67 year old Black grandmother, murdered in 1984 in her own apartment by New York City Housing policemen with a shotgun, during eviction for being one month behind on her rent in public housing.

Yvonne Smallwood, beaten to death by New York City policemen on a Manhattan street corner over a traffic ticket given to her boyfriend.

² Kalamu ya Salaam, "Rape: A Radical Analysis From An African-American Perspective," *Our Women Keep Our Skies From Falling*, Nkombu, 1980, pp.25-41.



Need:
A Chorale for
Black Woman Voices

For Patricia Cowan and Bobbie Jean Graham¹
and the hundreds of other mangled Black Women
whose nightmares inform these words

*tattle tale tit
your tongue will be slit
and every little boy in town
shall have a little bit.*

—Nursery Rhyme

I.

(Poet)

This woman is Black
so her blood is shed into silence
this woman is Black
so her blood falls to earth
like the droppings of birds
to be washed away with silence and rain.

(Pat)

For a long time after the baby came
I didn't go out at all
and it got to be pretty lonely.
Then Bubba started asking about his father
made me want
to connect with the blood again
maybe I'd meet someone
we could move on together
help make the dream real .
An ad in the paper said
"Black actress needed
to audition in a play by Black Playwright."
I was anxious to get back to work
and this was a good place to start
so Monday afternoon
on the way home from school with Bubba
I answered the ad.

In the middle of the second act
he put a hammer through my head.

(Bobbie)

If you're hit in the middle of Broadway
by a ten-ton truck
your caved-in chest bears the mark of a tire
and your liver pops like a rubber ball.
If you're knocked down by a boulder
from a poorly graded hill
your dying is stamped with the print of rock
covering your crushed body
the impersonal weight of it all.

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But when your boyfriend methodically

beats you to death
in the alley behind your apartment
while your neighbors
pull down their window shades
because they don't want to get involved
the police call it a crime of 'passion'
not a crime of hatred.

Yet I still died
of a lacerated liver
and a man's heelprint
upon my chest.

II.

(Poet)

Dead Black women haunt the black maled streets
paying our cities' secret and familiar tithes of blood
burn blood beat blood cut blood
seven-year-old child rape-victim blood
of a sodomized grandmother blood
on the hands of my brother
as women we were meant to bleed
but not this useless blood
each month a memorial
to my unspoken sisters fallen
red drops upon asphalt.

(All)

We were not meant to bleed
a symbol for no one's redemption
Is it our blood
that keeps these cities fertile?

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(Poet)

I do not even know all their names.
Black women's deaths are not noteworthy
not threatening or glamorous enough
to decorate the evening news
not important enough to be fossilized
between right-to-life pickets
and a march against gun control
we are refuse in this city's war
with no medals no exchange of prisoners
no packages from home no time off
for good behavior
no victories. No victors.

(Bobbie)

How can I build a nation
afraid to walk out into moonlight
lest I lose my power
afraid to speak out
lest my tongue be slit
my ribs kicked in
by a brawny acquaintance
my liver bleeding life onto the stone?

(All)

How many other deaths
do we live through daily
pretending
we are alive?

III.

(Pat)

What terror embroidered my face
onto your hatred
what ancient unchallenged enemy
took on my sweet brown flesh
within your eyes
came armed against you
with only my laughter my hopeful art
my hair catching the late sunlight
my small son eager to see his mama work?
On this front page
My blood stiffens in the cracks of your fingers
raised to wipe a half-smile from your lips.
Beside you a white policeman
bends over my bleeding son
decaying into my brother
who stalked me with a singing hammer.
I need you. For what?
Was there no better place
to dig for your manhood
except in my woman's bone?

(Bobbie)

And what do you need me for, brother,
to move for you feel for you die for you?
We have a grave need for each other
but your eyes are thirsty
for vengeance
dressed in the easiest blood
and I am closest.

(Pat)

When you opened my head with your hammer
did the boogie stop in your brain
the beat go on
did terror run out of you like curdled fury
a half-smile upon your lips?
And did your manhood lay in my skull
like a netted fish
or did it spill out like milk or blood
or impotent fury off the tips of your fingers
as your sledgehammer clove my bone
to let the light out
did you touch it as it flew away?

(Bobbie)

Borrowed hymns veil a misplaced hatred
saying you need me you need me you need me
a broken drum
calling me Black goddess Black hope Black
strength Black mother
yet you touch me
and I die in the alleys of Boston
my stomach stomped through the small of my back
my hammered-in skull in Detroit
a ceremonial knife
through my grandmother's used vagina
my burned body hacked to convenience
in a vacant lot
I lie in midnight blood like a rebel city
bombed into submission
while our enemies still sit in power
and judgement
over us all.

(Bobbie & Pat)

Do you need me submitting to terror at nightfall
to chop into bits and stuff warm into plastic bags
near the neck of the Harlem River
they found me eight months swollen
with your need
do you need me to rape in my seventh year
bloody semen in the corners of my childish mouth
as you accuse me of being seductive.

(All)

Do you need me imprinting upon our children
the destruction our enemies print upon you
like a Mack truck or an avalanche
destroying us both
carrying their hatred back home
you re-learn my value
in an enemy coin.

IV.

(Poet)

I am wary of need that tastes like destruction.

(All)

I am wary of need
that tastes like destruction.

(Poet)

Who learns to love me
from the mouth of my enemies
walks the edge of my world
a phantom in a crimson cloak
and the dreambooks speak of money
but my eyes say death.

The simplest part of this poem
is the truth in each one of us
to which it is speaking.

How much of this truth can I bear
to see
and still live
unblinded?
How much of this pain can I use?

“We cannot live without our lives.”

(All)

“We cannot live without our lives.”

Notes

1 Patricia Cowan, 21, bludgeoned to death in Detroit, 1978.

Bobbie Jean Graham, 34, beaten to death in Boston, 1979. One of 12 Black women murdered within a 4-month period in that city.

“We cannot live without our lives,” quoted from Barbara Denning.