



UNDERSONG

CHOSEN POEMS OLD AND NEW

— REVISED —

A U D R E L O R D E

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CHOSEN POEMS OLD AND NEW

REVISED EDITION

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OTHER BOOKS BY AUDRE LORDE

The First Cities
Cables to Rage
From a Land Where Other People Live
The New York Head Shop and Museum
Coal
Between Our Selves
The Black Unicorn
The Cancer Journals
Zami—A New Spelling of My Name
Chosen Poems—Old and New
Sister Outsider
Our Dead Behind Us
A Burst of Light
The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance

undersong

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TO GLORIA, WITH ALL
THE TIME IN THE WORLD.

INTRODUCTION

This volume represents revisions of the poems contained in *Chosen Poems—Old and New* (1982). Three poems have been dropped from the first edition because they required reconstruction rather than revision. Nine poems from the same time period that were not included in the earlier edition have been added because time and distance have illuminated their use.

The process of revision is, I believe, crucial to the integrity and lasting power of a poem. The problem in reworking any poem is always when to let go of it, refusing to give in to the desire to have that particular poem *do it all*, say it all, become the mythical, unattainable Universal Poem.

In order to revise effectively rather than construct a new work, one must establish the world of the poem—that constellation within emotional time and space from which the poem draws power and life. Within that world, the problem of revision is to make the poem become more itself, rather than another poem. I found this required me to propel myself back into the original poem-creating process and the poet who wrote it. Once I reestablished the world of the poem, revision served to help the poem do its work more effectively.

This is a fascinating and demanding process, one that requires reinventing the emotional climate of the often diverse experiences out of which the poem grew—recalling what the task of the poem originally was and keeping that task firmly in mind, rather than some other task the poet now might like the poem to accomplish. In other words, I set myself the task of revising, not rewriting, these poems.

This project began while I was trapped in the nightmare aftermath of Hurricane Hugo. Our house, library, and whole way of

life had been destroyed in one night. While shoveling out the soaked remains of my studio, I came across a waterlogged but readable copy of *Chosen Poems*, one of the few salvageable books from my library after the storm. Weary from crisis and from lugging and hauling debris, I sat down for a few minutes and found myself reading these poems as if I were in a workshop. They were touching and powerful, but with certain nonuseful ambiguities that I would advise any young poet to reconsider in order to strengthen the poem.

If a poem has a job, how best can we help it do that job across several decades? The answers are never simple.

For every poem written, there is the bedrock of experience(s) within which the poem is anchored. A molten hot light shines up through the poem from the core of these experiences. This is the human truth that illuminates the poem, surrounding it in the light that makes it come alive.

That light can shift and alter; but if the poem is firmly anchored, it will not be quenched. How to honor that light, do justice to the subtlety of its changing auras, without shifting or fracturing the bedrock from which the poem arises—that is the task of revision: to make the poem more of what it needs to be in order to do the emotional work it was intended to do.

In order to achieve that goal, I kept two questions before me: the first, What did I want my readers to feel? and, second, What was the work of this poem (its task in the world)?

If the poem is not firmly anchored or the illumination too muddled or confused, then the poem must be reconstructed rather than revised. Hopefully, by the time a poem reaches print, it may profit from revision but does not have to be rebuilt.

In the next three months of kerosene lamps and generators, hauling water and cooking over driftwood fires, I held myself each day to a brief discipline of re feeling, reliving, and revising these poems. That enterprise taught me much about the process

of revising poetry and the heightened level of honesty that revision demands. It also helped preserve my sanity in a difficult time, giving me a different and solitary clearing within which to recall the enduring qualities of the human spirit, and the girl and young woman I was when these poems were being written. I marveled at what she knew as well as what she did not know, and how she learned to put both together into a working poem.

I find these poems are still useful to me, and I wish to make them even more useful for other readers.

Audre Lorde

St. Croix, Virgin Islands

January 2, 1990–August 30, 1991

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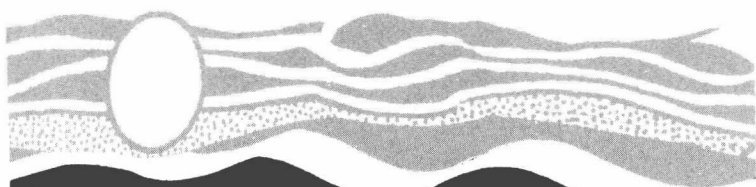
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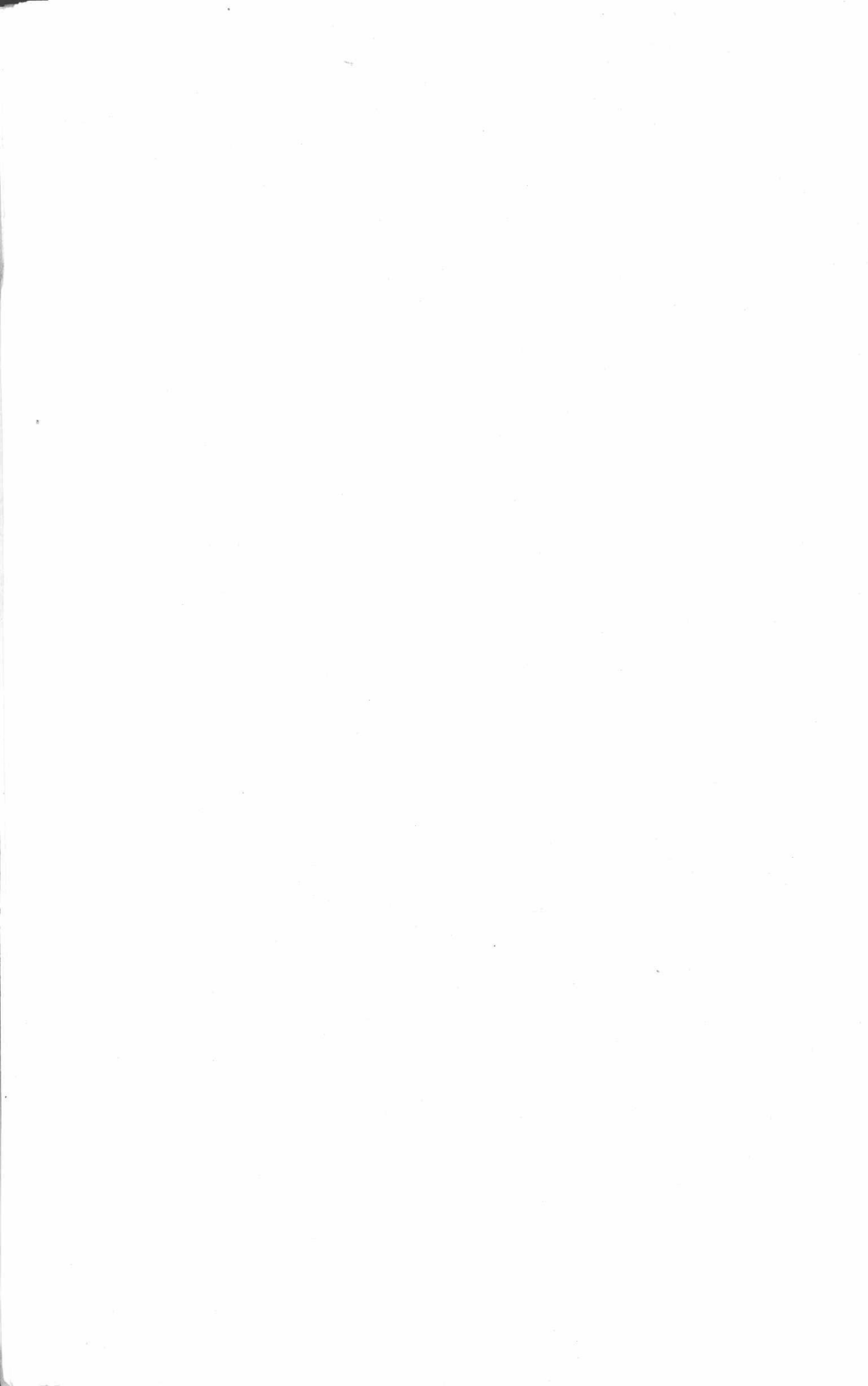
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From COAL, FIRST CITIES,
and CABLES TO RAGE

part 1



MEMORIAL

If you come as softly
as wind within the trees
you may hear what I hear
see what sorrow sees.

If you come as lightly
as the threading dew
I will take you gladly
nor ask more of you.

You may sit beside me
silent as a breath
only those who stay dead
shall remember death.

If you come I will be silent
nor speak harsh words to you
I will not ask you why, now,
nor how, nor what you do.

But we shall sit here softly
beneath two different years
and the rich earth between us
shall drink our tears.

(1950)