A Litany for Survival

SUMMARY

The speaker addresses those people who live on the shifting edges of society, constantly having to make tough decisions alone; those who can't afford to entertain fleeting dreams; those who express their love in doorways in the middle of the night, who are always the lookout, trying to survive the present and nourish the dreams of their children rather than their own.

Such people, the speaker continues, were born with fear, which is like a pale mark in the middle of their foreheads. They learned to be afraid even as their mothers nursed them because the dominant members of society used fear as a weapon, peddling the false narrative that staying quiet would keep oppressed people safe. The speaker is talking to all of those people who were never meant to live through this moment and this victory.

The speaker describes ways in which these people can never feel comfortable and secure, even in moments of good fortune: when the sun comes up they fear that it won't stay, and when the sun goes down they fear that it won't come back up; when they eat they fear getting stomach aches and when they haven't eaten they fear they'll go hungry; when they love they worry it won't last and when they've lost love they fear it'll never come back; they fear that no one will listen to them when they speak up, but the fear doesn't go away when they stay quiet.

As such, the speaker concludes, it's better to just speak up, knowing they weren't supposed to survive this world in the first place.

THEMES

FEAR, MARGINALIZATION, AND SILENCE

"Litany for Survival" reads like a prayer, or even an anthem, for the marginalized and oppressed. Such people, the speaker says, live in a state of constant fear and have been pushed to stay silent in order to get by in a world they were "never meant to survive." Yet the poem also makes clear that such fear and silence won't actually protect or help these people. Instead, the poem suggests, it only upholds the very systems that oppress them. For this reason, the speaker argues that ultimately it is "better to speak" up: if marginalized people are going to be subject to fear either way, then they don't really have anything to lose by breaking their silence—and, in fact, they just might have something to *gain*.

The poem starts by illustrating how vulnerable members of society can't live freely and openly in the way that other, non-marginalized people can. Instead, they're endlessly having to adapt to the oppressive forces around them. The speaker mentions having to "love in doorways" at night, for example, which is likely an allusion to LGBTQ people who are unable to express their love in public out of fear for their safety (Lorde herself was a lesbian who spent much of her life fighting for LGBTQ rights).

Regardless of whether times are good or bad, the poem implies, marginalized people still live in fear because the future isn't promised to them. They can't fully embrace joy or happiness because they are always on alert. Marginalized people are thus also unable to "indulge / the passing dreams of choice" and must instead focus on the "now." This implies a link between fear and oppression: not being able to think about the future keeps marginalized people stuck in their present, terrified of speaking up or fighting for change.

The speaker also argues that marginalized people are taught that they can protect themselves and their loved ones by remaining quiet about the oppression they face. And yet, the speaker insists, this silence hasn't actually resulted in their being any safer; no amount of being quiet and keeping their heads down is going to save them. In fact, the speaker says that "the illusion of [...] safety" is a "weapon" that is used against marginalized communities by "the heavy-footed" (that is, by those who have something to gain by these people's continued oppression). In other words, silence is a tool of *oppression* rather than *protection*.

Understanding that oppression means marginalized people are going to be afraid no matter what, the speaker encourages them to consider that they have nothing to lose by speaking up. Ultimately, the poem argues that it is better to speak knowing they "were never meant to survive" than to silently accept the way things are.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-44

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

For those of ...
... crucial and alone

The speaker begins by declaring who this poem is *for*: "those of us who live at the shoreline." The "us" here signals that the speaker is part of this group and is speaking from a place of personal experience.

That metaphorical shoreline, meanwhile, suggests that the people the speaker is addressing don't have the luxury of getting to be still and put down real roots: they're too busy dealing with the pressures of living a marginalized existence, of occupying the thin, shifting line between ocean and land.

The speaker describes these people as "standing upon the constant edges of decision." In other words, these aren't people who can relax or take things for granted. Every choice is "crucial," or of great importance, and they feel "alone" in making these choices because society doesn't care what happens to them.

These lines feature a loud mix of consonance, sibilance, and alliteration. All these noisy sounds might evoke a rocky or unsteady shoreline, in turn suggesting the unforgiving landscape of these people's lives:

> standing upon the constant edges of decision

The hard alliteration of "constant" and "crucial" in particular evokes the crashing of waves against the shoreline, a sound that hints at the overwhelming violence faced by marginalized communities.

LINES 4-9

> *for those of ...*
> *... before and after*

Line 4 begins with anaphora, repeating the phrase that opened the poem: "For those of us who." This anaphora brings the reader's attention back to the people the poem is for and also lends the poem a feeling of powerful momentum, as if the speaker is building towards something.

This time, the speaker says that the poem is for those "who cannot indulge"—or entertain, enjoy—"the passing dreams of choice." For vulnerable people just trying to get from one moment to the next, options are limited. The phrase "passing dreams" makes "choice" itself seem like something frivolous—something that the poem's intended audience doesn't have the time or energy for. Instead of pleasurable choices, they can only make tough "decisions."

The speaker goes on to say that the people this poem is for "love in doorways." This is a metaphor for the way marginalized folks don't have the luxury of sitting still and being in one place: they're always "coming and going," always "between dawns."

The image of lovers clandestinely meeting inside a doorway in the middle of the night is also likely an allusion to the LGBTQ community, with which Lorde herself identified. In a homophobic society, the line implies, queer people are forced to hide in the shadows, unable to express their love in public. The fact that they are always "looking inward and outward / at once before and after" speaks to the ever-present sense of fear felt by people who are pushed to the margins of society.

LINES 10-14

> *seeking a now ...*
> *... death of ours;*

The speaker says that what marginalized people really want is "a now that can breed / futures." In other words, they want a present in which they aren't just *surviving*, but *thriving*—one in which they have the energy, time, and space to think about and plan for what's to come.

Using a simile, the speaker compares this kind of a present to "bread in our children's mouths." Such a present—in which marginalized folks can finally slow down and take a deep breath and have their needs met—is a kind of nourishment, the fuel that communities need to grow, just as children need food to grow. Alliteration and consonance result in a slant rhyme between "breed" and "bread," reflecting the relationship between being literally and metaphorically nourished and the ability to have any kind of a future.

The speaker goes on to say that only through attaining this kind of present can their *children's* dreams flourish, rather than "reflect the death of" their parents' dreams. Parents have not had the chance to truly dream; their dreams did not receive the "bread," the nourishment of safety and security, necessary to thrive. They don't want the same for their children: they're trying to lay a foundation so that their children can dream in a way that they themselves could not.

The /d/ alliteration connecting "dreams" and "death" highlights the contrast between parents' present situation and their hopes for their children's future.

LINES 15-18

> *For those of ...*
> *... our mother's milk*

The second stanza begins with the same anaphora as the first ("For those of us / who"). The speaker keeps the focus on the poem's intended audience, and the community of which the speaker is a part.

The speaker continues to describe what it is like to be marginalized, saying that vulnerable people are "imprinted with fear / like a faint line in the center of our foreheads." This simile compares the mental and emotional impact of fear to a physical crease in the skin, a kind of birthmark or wrinkle that gets handed down. Indeed, the speaker describes "learning to be afraid with our mother's milk," suggesting that this fear isn't just learned over the course of a single lifetime, but is in fact passed down from generation to generation.

These lines are filled with muffled alliteration—/f/, /l/, and /m/ sounds:

> [...] fear
> like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
> learning to be afraid with our mother's milk

These relatively soft sounds evoke a gentleness that is at odds with the pervasive sense of fear the speaker is describing. Even images that should feel comforting and wholesome (new babies, mothers nursing) can't escape the aura of fear. It seems that the experience of oppression taints *everything*.

LINES 19-24

for by this ...
... meant to survive.

The speaker goes on to say that fear is a "weapon" used by the "heavy-footed" to further oppress marginalized people. In other words, marginalized people have been taught to stay quiet about their own oppression in the hopes that if they keep their heads down and don't make a fuss, things will be better for them.

But this promise of "some safety to be found," the speaker insists, is nothing but an "illusion"—a fantasy peddled by the oppressors to quell dissent. By believing in this false narrative, marginalized people play into their oppressor's hands, upholding the very systems that oppress them.

Note how the sounds of these lines evoke the very silence being described, through the consonance of muted /f/ sound and hushed /s/ sounds (a.k.a. sibilance), and the breathy alliteration of /h/ sounds:

> this illusion of some safety to be found
> the heavy-footed hoped to silence us

The speaker ends the stanza by declaring that marginalized people "were never meant to survive" at all. That is, they are marginalized *by design*. Their oppressors want them to believe that staying quiet will save them because without speaking up, nothing will ever change.

If marginalized people can accept that their survival was never important to the "heavy-footed" people trying to oppress them, the speaker argues, then they will be emboldened to speak up—knowing they in fact have nothing to lose by breaking their silence.

LINES 25-28

And when the ...
... in the morning

In the third stanza, the speaker expands on what it feels like to be constantly afraid. The marginalized can never take moments of good fortune for granted and are always waiting for the other shoe to drop. They must be always vigilant, not knowing *where* danger will come, only that it is unavoidable.

Note the parallelism of these lines. While the verbs change—"rises" vs. "sets"; "remain" vs. "rise"—the overall structure of the sentences stays the same:

> And when the sun rises we are afraid
> it might not remain
> when the sun sets we are afraid
> it might not rise in the morning

This parallelism (which is also an example of antithesis), which the speaker will turn to again and again throughout this stanza, reflects the idea that, regardless of what happens around them, marginalized people will still feel afraid; even in good times, there's no guarantee their needs will continue to be met in the future.

The parallel structure of these lines also includes anaphora (the repetition of words or phrases at the beginnings of successive lines or clauses) and epistrophe (exactly the same as anaphora, except at the *ends* of lines or clauses) as well. Anaphora lends momentum to the poem, while epistrophe really drives home the poem's central concern, that marginalized people are "afraid" regardless of whether they keep silent or speak up.

LINES 29-32

when our stomachs ...
... never eat again

The speaker repeats the pattern of the preceding lines, presenting two contrasting ideas (being full and being hungry) to show how fear pervades the lives of marginalized people regardless of how their circumstances may change. Note the continued parallelism/antithesis of these lines:

> when our stomachs are full we are afraid
> of indigestion
> when our stomachs are empty were are afraid
> we may never eat again

Neither a full belly nor an empty one can assuage this fear, which is bigger than any individual situation the speaker provides; when nothing is guaranteed, this fear permeates *everything*. Anaphora and epistrophe continue to bookend every other line. By sandwiching the specifics (hunger vs. indigestion) between "when" and "we are afraid," the poem makes it clear that those specifics don't really matter.

This list isn't just literal, but representative: its exhaustiveness is the point. Struggling to survive each day means fear saturates even the small, seemingly insignificant moments (having "indigestion," for example, is an issue if one doesn't have access to healthcare or if one can't afford to change one's diet) as well as the larger ones.

LINES 33-36

when we are ...
... will never return

The speaker again turns to parallelism and antithesis, illustrating how, regardless of circumstances, fear will continue

to pervade marginalized people's lives. Nothing detracts from this fear—not even the presence or absence of love.

The speaker says that when these people have love, they are terrified it will "vanish." In other words, they can never relax or simply enjoy and appreciate love, because there's no guarantee that it won't disappear or be taken away.

The soft /l/ and /v/ consonance in these lines ("loved," "will," "vanish," "alone," "never") makes them feel gentle and suggests that this fear impacts even the most intimate, vulnerable parts of people's lives. There is no part of existence for marginalized people that is safe from the impact of this fear.

By this point in the stanza, the insistent use of parallelism, anaphora, and epistrophe has probably begun to feel somewhat relentless and stifling to the reader. In this way, the poem's language evokes the oppressive feeling of the fear that marginalized people face.

LINES 37-41

and when we ...
... are still afraid

The speaker ends the third stanza with one final example of the ever-present fear experienced by marginalized people—one that's vital to the poem's message.

The speaker says that part of the reason marginalized people remain silent is that they're worried that they won't be "heard" or "welcomed" if they speak up. They fear that saying something won't help them and might even make things worse. Yet, the speaker argues, things don't get better when they stay silent! Their oppression continues, and their fear remains.

While the speaker continues to use parallelism, anaphora (the repetition of "when" at the beginnings of lines), and epistrophe (the repetition of "we are afraid" at the ends of lines)s, there is one notable difference as the stanza reaches its conclusion. Throughout the rest of the stanza, the speaker includes the "when" and "we are afraid" statements on the same line, as in:

> when we are loved we are afraid

And:

> when we are alone we are afraid

Here, however, there's a line break after that "when" phrase:

> but when we are silent
> we are still afraid

This adds a dramatic, "silent" pause—one that evokes the silence the speaker is talking about. The line break also isolates "we are still afraid" to its *own* line. This, along with the addition of the emphatic "still," draws extra attention to the main idea of the whole stanza: fear is a constant in these people's lives. Nothing—no amount of silence or cooperation or trying to play by the rules—can change the fear that marginalized people feel in an oppressive society.

LINES 42-44

So it is ...
... meant to survive.

Given that being silent can't save marginalized people from their fear, the speaker argues, it's "better to speak"—to stand up for themselves, fight back against their oppression. They do this with the understanding that they "were never meant to survive." Their lives are difficult and their needs unmet because someone else profits off of their suffering.

The brevity of the last stanza, just three lines long, makes it stand out, especially in comparison to the relentless repetition of the previous stanza. Visually, it feels as if the poem is trying to break away from this repetition—from this relentless oppression. In order for anything to change, the speaker implies here, marginalized people are going to have to use their voices even in the face of constant fear.

While the poem is titled a "Litany for Survival" (a litany being a list or series of petitions), the speaker ultimately seems to argue that marginalized folks deserve more than just survival—they deserve change. They deserve an end to this onslaught of fear. And the only way that change is going to occur, the poem implies, is if they *demand* it.

POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is one of several forms of repetition in this poem, all of which add to its sense of passion and forcefulness.

In the first stanza, for example, the speaker repeats the phrase "For those of us who" (which is also an example of anaphora), followed by a phrase describing something that defines the life of "those" whom the speaker is addressing. There's also parallelism in the phrases "coming and going," "inward and outward," "before and after." Together, all this parallelism builds up the first stanza's intensity, creating a steady, progressive rhythm that pulls readers forward through the poem.

But the strongest parallelism comes in the poem's third stanza, which features parallel phrase after parallel phrase. Every two lines mirror the two preceding lines. Take lines 25-28 for example:

> And when the sun rises we are afraid
> it might not remain
> when the sun sets we are afraid
> it might not rise in the morning

The repetition of sentence structures draws attention to the fact that regardless of what the sun does, these people feel afraid. Their fear isn't really *dependent* on the sun, even though that's what it seems like at first; their fear is constant, and nothing the sun does can assuage it.

The speaker repeats this format throughout the stanza, presenting two opposing states and insisting that people's fear exists in both. This device is also an example of antithesis, which hammers home the point that there's no safe place for the people the speaker addresses—that there's no escape from their fear.

In lines 37-41, the parallel grammatical structure is varied just slightly, but only enough to add further emphasis:

> and when we speak we are afraid
> our words will not be heard
> nor welcomed
> but when we are silent
> we are still afraid

The addition of line 39 ("nor welcomed") breaks up the repetition a bit, just enough to draw out the feeling of what the speaker is saying: that even if these people's words were heard, they wouldn't be welcome. They are being "unheard" on purpose. By breaking up the final phrase ("but when we are silent / we are still afraid") into two lines, the weight of stanza three falls firmly upon that final admission: that no matter what happens, these people will be filled with fear.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "For those of us who live at the shoreline"
- **Line 4:** "for those of us who cannot indulge"
- **Line 6:** "who love in doorways coming and going"
- **Lines 8-9:** "looking inward and outward / at once before and after"
- **Lines 15-16:** "For those of us / who were imprinted with fear"
- **Line 22:** "For all of us"
- **Lines 25-41:** "And when the sun rises we are afraid / it might not remain / when the sun sets we are afraid / it might not rise in the morning / when our stomachs are full we are afraid / of indigestion / when our stomachs are empty we are afraid / we may never eat again / when we are loved we are afraid / love will vanish / when we are alone we are afraid / love will never return / and when we speak we are afraid / our words will not be heard / nor welcomed / but when we are silent / we are still afraid"

ANAPHORA

In addition to its broader parallelism, the poem also features lots of specific anaphora. Anaphora adds momentum to the poem, ramping up its intensity, and also gives it its speech-like sense of rhythm and persuasion. This makes sense: this poem is a "litany," a kind of repetitive prayer or recitation, meant to encourage marginalized people to speak up for themselves. It needs to inspire feelings of empowerment and even anger—it is a poem meant to galvanize, to get people *acting*.

In the first two stanzas of the poem, anaphora helps define who this poem is *for*. The speaker isn't claiming to speak for everyone.; instead, the poem is meant "For those [...] who" are unable to dream of the future because they're too busy trying to survive the present.

In the third stanza, the repetition of the word "when" draws attention to the idea that there is *no good time* to speak up: if these people are waiting for a time when they are not afraid, they will never speak.

All this repetitive language is insistent and maybe even a bit exhausting. It suggests that this list of examples is only the beginning—that it could go on and on. There is no scenario in which these people aren't deeply aware of how vulnerable they are.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "For those of us who"
- **Line 4:** "for those of us who"
- **Line 6:** "who"
- **Lines 15-16:** "For those of us / who"
- **Line 19:** "for"
- **Line 22:** "For"
- **Line 25:** "And when"
- **Line 27:** "when"
- **Line 29:** "when"
- **Line 31:** "when"
- **Line 33:** "when"
- **Line 35:** "when"
- **Line 37:** "and when"
- **Line 40:** "but when"

EPISTROPHE

Epistrophe is another form of repetition in the poem, and it works a lot like the poem's anaphora and broader parallelism. All these devices together add a sense of intensity as the poem barrels toward its conclusion.

In the poem's third stanza, epistrophe draws attention to the underlying element in all of the speaker's descriptions: fear. By repeating the phrase "we are afraid" at the end of line after line after line, the speaker highlights the fact that regardless of what is happening around them, these people are always subject to a deep sense of fear because their place in society is so precarious. The speaker knows that regardless of whether their stomachs are "full" or "empty," or whether they are "loved" or "alone," marginalized people at the end of the day still won't

be safe in a prejudiced, oppressive world.

Of all the forms of repetition in this poem, epistrophe might be the most striking because of its relentlessness. And because the word being repeated is an explicit emotion rather than something more subtle or open to interpretation, there is no misconstruing what the speaker is trying to convey: fear is built into the fabric of marginalized people's lives.

Where Epistrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** "we are afraid"
- **Line 27:** "we are afraid"
- **Line 29:** "we are afraid"
- **Line 31:** "we are afraid"
- **Line 33:** "we are afraid"
- **Line 35:** "we are afraid"
- **Line 37:** "we are afraid"

CONSONANCE

The poem uses consonance now and then to add music and intensity to its otherwise clear, straightforward language.

In the opening lines, for example, note how the repetition of many crisp /c/ and /t/ sounds, buzzing /z/ sounds, nasal /n/, and thudding /d/ sounds lend a noisy intensity to the speaker's callout:

> standing upon the constant edges of decision
> crucial and alone
> for those of us who cannot indulge

This cacophony of different sounds evokes not only the clamor of "living at the shorelines" (that is, the loud crashing of the sea) but also the chaos of trying to survive as a person who is marginalized and vulnerable.

In contrast, the sibilance, muted /f/, and breathy /h/ sounds of lines 20-21 suggest a kind of muffled whisper, evoking the way marginalized people have been historically silenced:

> this illusion of some safety to be found
> the heavy-footed hoped to silence us

The speaker uses consonance like this throughout the poem, drawing attention to important moments and even evoking lines' content through sound.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "live," "shoreline"
- **Line 2:** "standing," "constant," "edges," "decision"
- **Line 3:** "crucial," "alone"
- **Line 4:** "cannot," "indulge"
- **Line 5:** "passing," "dreams," "choice"
- **Line 6:** "doorways"
- **Line 7:** "between dawns"
- **Line 8:** "inward," "outward"
- **Line 9:** "once," "before," "after"
- **Line 10:** "breed"
- **Line 12:** "bread"
- **Line 13:** "dreams"
- **Line 14:** "death"
- **Line 16:** "fear"
- **Line 17:** "like," "faint," "line," "foreheads"
- **Line 18:** "learning," "afraid," "mother's milk"
- **Line 20:** "some safety," "found"
- **Line 21:** "heavy-footed hoped," "silence us"
- **Line 23:** "this instant," "this triumph"
- **Line 24:** "We were," "never," "survive"
- **Line 27:** "sun sets"
- **Line 33:** "when we"
- **Line 34:** "love," "vanish"
- **Line 35:** "when we"
- **Line 36:** "love," "never"
- **Line 37:** "when we"
- **Line 38:** "words will," "heard"
- **Line 39:** "welcomed"
- **Line 40:** "when we"

ALLITERATION

Like consonance, alliteration adds rhythm and intensity to the poem. Take lines 16-18:

> [...] with fear
> like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
> learning to be afraid with our mother's milk

The alliteration (of /f/, /l/, and /m/ sounds) adds musicality and emphasis to the speaker's description of the way fear gets ingrained in marginalized people from birth. These sounds are relatively gentle as well, suggesting the way that this fear delicately, maybe even imperceptibly, becomes a part of marginalized people's lives.

Alliteration can also draw attention to the relationship between specific words, as in lines 10 and 12:

> seeking a now that can breed
> futures
> like bread [...]

These words are connected not only by alliteration but consonance (both end with /d/ sounds). These shared sounds here emphasize the relationship between being able to plan for the future (i.e. "breed[ing]," or propagating) and being able to make ends meet in the present (i.e. having "bread" for the children to eat). Similarly, in lines 13 and 14, the /d/ alliteration

in "dreams" and "death" highlights the disparity between marginalized people's hopes and their fears.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "dreams"
- **Line 6:** "doorways"
- **Line 7:** "dawns"
- **Line 10:** "breed"
- **Line 12:** "bread"
- **Line 13:** "dreams"
- **Line 14:** "death"
- **Line 16:** "fear"
- **Line 17:** "like," "faint," "line," "foreheads"
- **Line 18:** "learning," "afraid," "mother's," "milk"
- **Line 20:** "some," "safety," "found"
- **Line 21:** "heavy," "footed," "hoped"
- **Line 24:** "We," "were"
- **Line 37:** "when," "we," "we"
- **Line 38:** "words," "will"
- **Line 39:** "welcomed"
- **Line 40:** "when," "we"
- **Line 41:** "we"
- **Line 44:** "we," "were"

METAPHOR

The poem uses two metaphors to describe the life of people marginalized by an oppressive society. In the first line, for example, the speaker describes these people as living "at the shoreline." The image of a shoreline—that constantly shifting, narrow line between ocean and land—suggests that to be marginalized is to not be given enough space to live and flourish.

It also suggests a kind of in-between space: after all, the shoreline isn't the ocean and it isn't the land, but rather a combination of both. This speaks to the difficulty of living as someone who doesn't fit neatly into a single category of identity. This could apply to Lorde herself, who was marginalized in white spaces for being Black, in Black spaces for being a lesbian, and in a male-dominated world for being a woman—and who refused to choose one of these identities as more important than the others.

In lines 6-7, the speaker uses another metaphor to describe marginalized people loving "in doorways coming and going / in the hours between dawns." This metaphor again points to the in-between space that marginalized people occupy. They aren't allowed to take up the same space as other people. This metaphor is likely an allusion, or reference, to the LGBTQ community; to be queer in a homophobic world means having to "love in doorways" because it is too dangerous to be seen in public spaces.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "For those of us who live at the shoreline"
- **Lines 6-7:** "who love in doorways coming and going / in the hours between dawns"

SIMILE

In addition to its metaphors, the poem uses two similes to describe what life for marginalized people is like.

In lines 10-12 ("seeking a now [...] our children's mouths"), the speaker compares finding a present reality in which marginalized people actually feel safe enough to plan for the future to "bread in our children's mouths." In other words, in order for people to have any hope of a better *future*, their material needs need to be met in the *present*. Just as a child needs food to grow up healthy and strong, people need to feel safe and rooted in the present in order to dream about the future. How can one expect people to flourish, the speaker suggests, if they aren't getting even their very basic needs met?

In lines 15-17 ("For those of [...] of our foreheads"), the speaker compares the emotional impact of fear to "a faint line in the center of our foreheads." Just as lines form in foreheads from years and years of concentration or worry, the hearts of marginalized people are marked by never being able to relax or stop worrying about how they will survive one day to the next. Living like this takes its toll, which the speaker goes on to say is the whole point—marginalized people were never actually intended to survive.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "seeking a now that can breed / futures / like bread in our children's mouths"
- **Lines 15-17:** "For those of us / who were imprinted with fear / like a faint line in the center of our foreheads"

ENJAMBMENT

Lorde doesn't use traditional punctuation in this poem, which lends it a sense of fluid, forward motion throughout; there are no periods or commas to slow the reader. Some lines naturally come to a pause because they contain full clauses, but many lines in the poem are clearly enjambed—their meanings flowing seamlessly past the line break. Take lines 4-5, for example:

> for those of us who cannot indulge
> the passing dreams of choice

The enjambment here creates a moment of expectation: for a moment, "indulge" stands alone, suggesting that the people the speaker is addressing can't take pleasure at all.

More broadly, the effect of all this enjambment and general lack of punctuation is a feeling of breathlessness. As the poem

tumbles down the page, it suggests what it feels like to never be able to stop and take a breath, gather one's bearings, or make a plan for the future. The form of the poem itself echoes the feeling of living from one day to the next, never having the energy or resources to look ahead, or the peace of mind to settle in and really enjoy the moment.

Such insistent enjambment also evokes the relentlessness of the fear experienced by these people. They never know what's going to happen next, and so they must remain vigilant.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "shoreline / standing"
- **Lines 2-3:** "decision / crucial"
- **Lines 4-5:** "indulge / the"
- **Lines 6-7:** "going / in"
- **Lines 7-8:** "dawns / looking"
- **Lines 8-9:** "outward / at"
- **Lines 9-10:** "after / seeking"
- **Lines 10-12:** "breed / futures / like"
- **Lines 12-13:** "mouths / so"
- **Lines 13-14:** "reflect / the"
- **Lines 15-16:** "us / who"
- **Lines 16-17:** "fear / like"
- **Lines 19-20:** "weapon / this"
- **Lines 20-21:** "found / the"
- **Lines 22-23:** "us / this"
- **Lines 23-24:** "triumph / We"
- **Lines 25-26:** "afraid / it"
- **Lines 27-28:** "afraid / it"
- **Lines 29-30:** "afraid / of"
- **Lines 31-32:** "afraid / we"
- **Lines 33-34:** "afraid / love"
- **Lines 35-36:** "afraid / love"
- **Lines 37-38:** "afraid / our"
- **Lines 38-39:** "heard / nor"
- **Lines 40-41:** "silent / we"
- **Lines 42-44:** "speak / remembering / we"

VOCABULARY

Shoreline (Line 1) - The line along which a large body of water meets the land.

Crucial (Line 3) - Of great importance; decisive or critical.

Indulge (Lines 4-5) - Allow oneself to enjoy; give oneself up to.

Imprinted (Line 16) - Marked, impressed, or stamped.

Illusion (Line 20) - A false idea or belief; something that is deceptive in appearance or impression.

Indigestion (Lines 29-30) - Difficulty digesting food; pain or discomfort associated with not being able to digest food.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem doesn't follow a traditional form such as a sonnet or a sestina. Instead, its 44 lines are simply broken into four stanzas of varying lengths, which don't follow any set patterns. As a "litany," or a kind of repetitive prayer or list, the poem also uses lots of anaphora, epistrophe, and general parallelism to create a sense of rhythm and building momentum.

Beyond that, the free-flowing shape of the poem makes sense: the speaker is talking about breaking from a tradition of silence in marginalized communities, and the poem itself is free from strict structures.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't have a set meter. Instead of a strict, rigid meter, the poem uses direct, everyday language to keeps things conversational and approachable—fitting considering it's meant to mobilize people into standing up against oppression. The poem's frequent repetition (particularly its anaphora, parallelism, and epistrophe) also lends it a steady rhythm and sense of momentum that makes it sound like a rousing speech or call to action.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "A Litany for Survival" doesn't have a set rhyme scheme. In fact, it steers clear of rhyme altogether, keeping its message straightforward and conversational. The poem uses direct, simple language and avoids pleasing rhythms, opting for other forms of emphasis (such as repetition).

SPEAKER

The speaker identifies as a member of the group of people being addressed throughout the poem—one of "those who [...] were imprinted with fear" at birth, who "cannot indulge / the passing dreams of choice," and who "love in doorways." While the poem never specifics exactly who these people are, it's clear that they are vulnerable and marginalized by an oppressive society.

It's worth noting that Lorde herself was writing from the intersection of various marginalized identities: she was Black, a lesbian, and a woman. The speaker, then, can be read as representing Lorde herself. At the same time, in keeping the speaker vague the poem allows anyone who has been marginalized or oppressed by the dominant members of society to identify with the poem's message.

The speaker believes that people like this "were never meant to survive," and thus doesn't think they have anything to lose by speaking out against their oppression. In writing this poem,

then, the speaker is doing exactly what the poem encourages its intended audience to do: speak up.

SETTING

The poem has no literal setting, which keeps its message universal and urgent. The poem is deliberately broad in scope: it's not focused on the oppression of one single group of people in a specific time and place, but rather is calling out to the vulnerable and marginalized members of society in general—anywhere, anytime.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Audre Lorde (1934-1992) started writing as a young girl and found early inspiration in poets such as John Keats and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Over the course of her life, her writing came to be known for its direct language, its insistence on racial justice, and its bold (and, at the time she was writing, still controversial) representations of queerness.

"Litany for Survival" was first published in her 1978 collection, *The Black Unicorn*. Like much of her work, this collection dealt largely with issues of race, gender, sexuality, and politics. Many of Lorde's poems can be classified as "protest poems"—poems meant to incite social change.

Lorde was also an important figure of the Black Arts Movement, a Black-led cultural and artistic movement in the 1960s and '70s that rejected many European artistic standards and encouraged Black pride. Other poets from the Black Arts Movement include Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ishmael Reed, Nikki Giovanni, and Maya Angelou.

The Black Arts Movement had its roots in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s, which saw many poets similarly rejecting European artistic forms, focusing on Black experiences, and incorporating blues and jazz rhythms into their writing. Like the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Lorde and other figures of the Black Arts Movement resisted the marginalization they faced from mainstream white institutions and traditions by building their own.

As a woman and a lesbian, Lorde used her poetry to fight against the additional forms of marginalization she experienced. An example of this can be seen in her insistence on publishing "Love Poem" with feminine pronouns despite her editor urging her not to. She later broke with this press (Broadside Press), one of the most important and influential in the Black Arts Movement, over their unwillingness to embrace her as not just a Black mother and teacher, but a lesbian as well.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lorde was born in Harlem, New York, in 1934, during the Great Depression, and came of age in the 1950s during the civil rights movement. At this time, Black Americans began organizing and protesting racial discrimination particularly in regards to voting. (Though Black men had technically had the right to vote since after the Civil War and women since 1920, states used various forms of voter suppression—anything from poll taxes to literacy tests—to prevent Black people from exercising that right.) Lorde was involved in the movement, and her literary career began to take off in the late 1960s (at which point she also came out as a lesbian).

Lorde found herself unsupported in the feminist spaces of her day, where white feminist academics often refused to acknowledge or address the additional ways in which Black and queer women were marginalized in society. In these spaces, Lorde was often perceived as an angry and overly-critical radical whose own words were not "welcomed." However, through her work, Lorde empowered many Black women (and queer Black women in particular) to embrace activism as a means to improving their lives.

In 1974, Lorde described herself in a magazine as "Black, Woman, Poet, Mother, Teacher, Friend, Lover, Fighter, Sister, Worker, Student, Dreamer, Artisan, Digger of the Earth. Secret: also Impatient, Beautiful, Uppity, and Fat." She spent much of her life challenging racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, all of which affected her personally. Though "Litany for Survival" doesn't name any of these systems of oppression outright, its message—to speak out against oppression—is applicable to any number of marginalized groups.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of Audre Lorde herself reading "A Litany for Survival." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsRPW-ES2Gk)
- Interview with the Poet — Check out a 1982 interview with Audre Lorde, conducted by Blanche Cook. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4rDL-xZ8N0)
- Lorde's Biography — Read more about Lorde's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde)
- The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism — Read a transcription of a keynote presentation Lorde gave to the National Women's Studies Association Conference in Storrs, Connecticut in 1981. (https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1981-audre-lorde-uses-anger-women-responding-racism/)

- The Black Arts Movement — Learn more about the cultural and artistic movement of which Lorde was a part. (https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/black-arts-movement-1965-1975/#:~:text=The%20Black%20Arts%20Movement%20was,of%20the%20Black%20Power%20Movement.&

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