

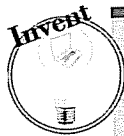
DEATH

In his last week, Zack says, "Take me to Dr. Lilliana, Mom. She'll fix me up." I tell him the doctors are looking for the right medicine. He trusts they will find it. But no repellent exists. The monsters are unstoppable.

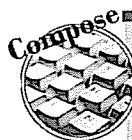
Days after his memorial service in the backyard, I return to my studio to press bits of old zinc type into a piece of soft wax. Cast in sterling, it becomes a bangle bracelet—a torn strip of silver with small dingbat hearts pressed into an irregular edge and a tiny train disappearing into the overlapping ends—a magic charm to beckon, not repel. Each morning I slip my hand inside my son's words. *I love you more than trains* circles the pulse points of my wrist: a silver incantation that summons a small ghostie.

Things are different now. There is no more Sunday chamber music. The grey-green volume disappeared long ago. In the empty yard, the only ghosts are my memories. I understand why the mother in Andersen's story was unafraid to follow Death down into a grave to find her boy.

I would welcome a haunting.



Anna Belle Kaufman's tragic account of the death of her young son from AIDS opens with Kaufman's memory of her fear of a childhood tale where Death appears to a mother weeping at her child's grave. Kaufman ends her narrative by stating that she now understands the story and no longer fears it. Why?



Kaufman's narrative has a number of recurring themes or symbols—monsters, trains, and the color "grey-green." Choose one of these items and analyze how it relates to the essay as a whole. What does it literally represent? What does it represent symbolically?

Acclaimed black lesbian and poet Audre Lorde used her literary talent to fight against racism, sexism, and homophobia. Her work includes *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), *The Black Unicorn* (1978), and the American Book Award-winning *A Burst of Life*. The piece below is a speech Lorde first gave at the Modern Language Association meeting in 1977 in which she calls on people to speak out about their own experiences with cancer.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF SILENCE INTO LANGUAGE AND ACTION

BY AUDRE LORDE

I would like to preface my remarks on the transformation of silence into language and action with a poem. The title of it is "A Song for Many Movements" and this reading is dedicated to Winnie Mandela. Winnie Mandela is a South African freedom fighter who is in exile now somewhere in South Africa. She had been in prison and had been released and was picked up again after she spoke out against the recent jailing of black school children who were singing freedom songs, and who were charged with public violence . . . "A Song for Many Movements":

Nobody wants to die on the way
caught between ghosts of whiteness
and the real water
none of us wanted to leave
our bones
on the way to salvation
three planets to the left
a century of light years ago
our spices are separate and particular
but our skins sing in complimentary keys
at a quarter to eight mean time
we were telling the same stories
over and over and over.

Broken down gods survive
 in the crevasses and mudpots
 of every beleaguered city
 where it is obvious
 there are too many bodies
 to cart to the ovens
 or gallows
 and our uses have become
 more important than our silence
 after the fall
 too many empty cases
 of blood to bury or burn
 there will be no body left
 to listen
 and our labor
 has become more important
 than our silence.

Our labor has become
 more important
 than our silence.

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect.

I was forced to look upon myself and my living with a harsh and urgent clarity that has left me still shaken but much stronger. Some of what I experienced during that time has helped elucidate for me much of what I feel concerning the transformation of silence into language and action.

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I *ever* been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change, or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had

only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours?

And, of course, I am afraid—you can hear it in my voice—because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth."

In the cause of silence, each one of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the very visibility without which we cannot truly live.

And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned, we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we still will be no less afraid.

Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation, and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.

DEATH

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone can we survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.

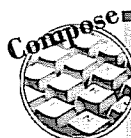
And it is never without fear; Of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now, that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective.

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

The fact that we are here and that I speak now these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.



Using your campus or local library, or an Internet search engine, such as Google or Bing, find examples of Audre Lorde's poetry. Do any of her other poems speak to the theme of death? Does her poetry reflect, in your opinion, the kind of feminist concerns she raises in her above speech?



Upon learning she may die of cancer, Lorde speaks about the things she cares most about—helping women find the courage to speak up publicly about issues that matter to them. If you were facing the possibility of death, what issue or issues would you most want to bring to public awareness? Write a short essay—3 to 5 paragraphs—about an issue you value, but may be afraid to speak about publicly.

*Roman Catholic religious sister Helen Prejean is a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph and is a well-known American advocate for the international abolishment of the death penalty. She began her prison ministry in 1981 in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, which inspired her 1993 book, *Dead Man Walking*. The book spent 31 weeks on the New York Times Best-Seller list, and was made into a major motion picture starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. In the excerpt below, Prejean narrates her account of the execution of convicted murderer Patrick Sonnier.*

excerpt from

DEAD MAN WALKING

BY HELEN PREJEAN, C.S.J.

"Just a little more coffee," Pat says.

"That's the shrink," he whispers.

The telephone rings again. Heart-stop. Wait. See if Rabelais comes with news. I imagine the words that will make all the difference: "Sonnier, you got a stay."

I look at my watch: 5:15. I call Joe Nursey again.

"Any word from Millard?"

"He's still at the mansion," Joe says. "All he said was that he was going to stay there until everything is all right."

What can that mean, I wonder. Why is he there so long? It must not have gone well. If it had, Millard would be calling us.

There is a gush of air as the front door opens. Pat looks. "It's Wardens Maggio and Thomas," he says. I turn to look at them. They are wearing three-piece suits. Each has a shortwave radio at his side.

It is 6:00. The sun has set behind the trees. Afternoon has now turned to evening. The sparrows are silent, nested up under the eaves for the night. It is time for Pat's final meal.