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 (y)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 that 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 rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious.

But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-European consciousness 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 so necessary for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean — in order to cover a 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 horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of “it feels right to me.” We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language 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 and vision; it is the skeleton
architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of
change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.

Possibility is neither forever nor instant. It is not easy to sus-
tain 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 those canards we have been socialized to fear, or
by the withdrawal of those approvial that we have been warned
to seek for safety. Women see ourselves diminished or softened
by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of nonuniver-
sality, of changeability, of sensuality. And who asks the ques-
tion: Am I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams, or am I
merely moving you to temporary and reactive action? And even
though the latter is no mean task, it is one that must be seen
within the context of a need for true alteration of the very foun-
dations of our lives.

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black
mother within each of us — the poet — whispers in our dreams:
I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to ex-
press and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementa-
tion of that freedom.

However, experience has taught us that action in the now is
also necessary, always. 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? “If you want us to change the world
someday, we at least have to live long enough to grow up!”
shouts the child.

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 combina-
tions, 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 that our dreams imply, and so many of our old
ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change,
there is only 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 living 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 expected to kneel to thought as women
were expected 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 surface in our dreams, and it is
our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams 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 discounted as a luxury,
then we give up the core — the fountain — of our power, our
womanness; we give up the future of our worlds.

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of mak-
ing them feel — of examining what those ideas feel like being
lived on Sunday morning at 7 A.M., after brunch, during wild
love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead — while we
suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of be-
ing silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibil-
ities and strengths.