

Classic Poetry Series

Adrienne Rich

- 32 poems -

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Adrienne Rich (16 May 1929 – 27 March 2012)

Adrienne Cecile Rich is an American poet, essayist and feminist. She has been called "one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the 20th century."

Life and Career

Early Life

Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland, the older of two sisters. Her father, the renowned pathologist Arnold Rice Rich, was a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins Medical School, and her mother, Helen Jones Rich, was a concert pianist until she married. Her father was Jewish and her mother was a Southern Protestant; the girls were raised as Christians. Adrienne Rich's early poetic influence stemmed from her father who encouraged her to read but also to write her own poetry. Her interest in literature was sparked within her father's library where she read the work of writers such as Ibsen, Arnold, Blake, Keats, Rossetti, and Tennyson. Her father was ambitious for Adrienne and "planned to create a prodigy." Adrienne Rich and her younger sister were home schooled by their mother until Adrienne began public education in the fourth grade. The poems *Sources* and *After Dark* document her relationship with her father, describing how she worked hard to fulfill her parents' ambitions for her - moving into a world in which she was expected to excel.

In later years, Rich went to Roland Park Country School, which she described as a "good old fashioned girls school [that] gave us fine role models of single women who were intellectually impassioned." After graduating, Rich gained her college diploma at Radcliffe College, Harvard, where she focused primarily on poetry and learning writing craft, encountering no women teachers at all. In 1951, her last year at college, Rich's first collection of poetry, *A Change of World*, was selected by the senior poet W.H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award; he went on to write the introduction to the published volume. Following her graduation, Rich received a Guggenheim Fellowship, to study in Oxford for a year. Following a visit to Florence, she decided to cut short her study at Oxford and spend her remaining time in Europe writing and exploring Italy.

Early Career: 1953-1975

In 1953, Rich married Alfred Haskell Conrad, an economics professor at Harvard University, whom she had met as an undergraduate. She had said of the match: "I married in part because I knew no better way to disconnect from my first family [...] I wanted what I saw as a full woman's life,

whatever was possible." They settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts and had three sons. The birth of David in 1955 coincided with the publication of her second volume, *The Diamond Cutters*, a collection she says she wishes had not been published. That same year, she also received the Ridgely Torrence Memorial Award for the Poetry Society of America. Her second son, Paul, was born in 1957, followed by Jacob in 1959.

The 1960s began a period of change in Rich's life: she received the National Institute of Arts and Letters award (1960), her second Guggenheim Fellowship to work at the Netherlands Economic Institute (1961), and the Bollingen Foundation grant for the translation of Dutch poetry (1962). In 1963, Rich published her third collection, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, which was a much more personal work examining her female identity, reflecting the increasing tensions she experienced as a wife and mother in the 1950s, marking a substantial change in Rich's style and subject matter. In her 1982 essay "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity", Rich states "The experience of motherhood was eventually to radicalize me." The book met with harsh reviews. She comments, "I was seen as 'bitter' and 'personal'; and to be personal was to be disqualified, and that was very shaking because I'd really gone out on a limb ... I realised I'd gotten slapped over the wrist, and I didn't attempt that kind of thing again for a long time."

Moving her family to New York in 1966, Rich became involved with the New Left and became heavily involved in anti-war, civil right, and feminist activism. Her husband took a teaching position at City College of New York. In 1968, she signed the "Writers and Editors War Tax Protest" pledge, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against the Vietnam War. Her collections from this period include *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969), and *The Will to Change* (1971), which reflect increasingly radical political content and interest in poetic form.

From 1967 to 1969, Rich lectured at Swarthmore College and taught at Columbia University School of the Arts as an adjunct professor in the Writing Division. Additionally, in 1968, she began teaching in the SEEK program in City College of New York, a position she continued until 1975. During this time, Rich also received the Eunice Tietjens Memorial Prize from Poetry Magazine. Increasingly militant, Rich hosted anti-Vietnam and Black Panther fundraising parties at their apartment; tensions began to split the marriage, Conrad fearing that his wife had lost her mind. The couple separated in mid-1970 and shortly afterward, in October, Conrad drove into the woods and shot himself.

In 1971, she was the recipient of the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America and spent the next year and a half teaching at Brandeis University as the Hurst Visiting Professor of Creative Writing. In 1973 that Rich wrote *Diving into the Wreck*, a collection of exploratory and often angry poems, which won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1974, which she shared with Allen Ginsberg. Declining to accept it individually, Rich was joined by the two other feminist poets nominated, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, to accept it on behalf of all women. The following year, Rich took up the position of the Lucy Martin Donnelly Fellow at Bryn Mawr College.

Later life: 1976 - present

In 1976, Rich began her lifelong partnership with Jamaican-born novelist and editor Michelle Cliff. In her controversial work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published the same year, Rich acknowledged that, for her, lesbianism was both a political as well as a personal issue, writing, "The suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her limbs." The pamphlet *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1977), which was incorporated into the following year's *Dream of a Common Language* (1978), marked the first direct treatment of lesbian desire and sexuality in her writing, themes which run throughout her work afterwards, especially in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) and some of her late poems in *The Fact of a Doorframe* (2001). In her analytical work *Adrienne Rich: the moment of change*, Langdell suggests these works

represent a central rite of passage for the poet, as she (Rich) crossed a threshold into a newly constellated life and a "new relationship with the universe". During this period, Rich also wrote a number of key socio-political essays, including "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", one of the first to address the theme of lesbian existence. In this essay, she asks "how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community, has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding". Some of the essays were republished in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (1979). In integrating such pieces into her work, Rich claimed her sexuality and took a role in leadership for sexual equality.

From 1976 to 1979, Rich taught at City College as well as Rutgers University as an English Professor. In 1979, she received an honorary doctorate from Smith College and moved with Cliff to Montague, MA. Ultimately, they moved to Santa Cruz, where Rich continued her career as a professor, lecturer, poet, and essayist. The two women took over editorship of the lesbian journal *Sinister Wisdom* in 1981. Rich taught and lectured at Scripps College, San Jose State University, and Stanford University during the 1980s and 1990s. From 1981 to 1987, Rich served as an A.D. White Professor-At-Large for Cornell University. Rich published several in the next few years: *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (1986), and *Time's Power: Poems 1985-1988* (1989). She also was awarded the Ruth Paul Lilly Poetry Prize (1986), the Elmer Holmes Bobst Award in Arts and Letters from NYU, and the National Poetry Association Award for Distinguished Service to the Art of Poetry (1989).

Rich's work with the New Jewish Agenda led to the founding of *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* in 1990, a journal of which Rich served as the editor. This work coincided explored the relationship between private and public histories, especially in the case of Jewish women's rights. Her next published piece, *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), won both the Los Angeles Times Book Award in Poetry and the Lenore Marshall/Nation Award as well as the Poet's Prize in 1993 and Commonwealth Award in Literature in 1991. During the 1990s Rich became an active member of numerous advisory boards such as the Boston Woman's Fund, National Writers Union and Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa. On the role of the poet, she has written, "We may feel bitterly how little our poems can do in the face of seemingly out-of-control technological power and seemingly limitless corporate greed, yet it has always been true that poetry can break isolation, show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or made invisible, remind us of beauty where no beauty seems possible, remind us of kinship where all is represented as separation." In July of 1994, Rich won the MacArthur Fellowship and Award, specifically the "Genius Grant" for her work as a poet and writer. Also in 1992, Rich became a grandmother to Julia Arden Conrad and Charles Reddington Conrad.

In 1997, Rich declined the National Medal of Arts in protesting against the House of Representatives' vote to end the National Endowment for the Arts as well as other policies of the Clinton Administration regarding the arts generally and literature in particular, stating that "I could not accept such an award from President Clinton or this White House because the very meaning of art, as I understand it, is incompatible with the cynical politics of this administration...[Art] means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of the power which holds it hostage". Her next few volumes were a mix of poetry and essays: *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995-1998* (1999), *The Art of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (2001), and *Fox: Poems 1998-2000* (2001).

In the early 2000s, Rich participated in anti-war activities, protesting against the threat of war in Iraq, both through readings of her poetry and other activities. In 2002, she was appointed a chancellor of the newly augmented board of the Academy of American Poets, along with Yusef Komunyakaa, Lucille Clifton, Jay Wright (who declined the honor, refusing to serve), Louise Gluck, Heather McHugh, Rosanna Warren, Charles Wright, Robert Creeley, and Michael Palmer. She was the winner of the 2003 Yale Bollingen Prize for American Poetry and applauded by the panel of judges for her "honesty at

once ferocious, humane, her deep learning, and her continuous poetic exploration and awareness of multiple selves." She currently lives in California.

Works:

Nonfiction books

Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. Norton. (1976)
On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978 (1979)
Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985 (1986)
What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics (1993)
Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations. W.W. Norton. (2001)
Poetry and Commitment: An Essay (2007)
A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997-2008 (2009)

Poetry collections

A Change of World. Yale University Press. (1951)
The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems. Harper. (1955)
Snapshots of a daughter-in-law: poems, 1954-1962. Harper & Row. (1963)
Necessities of life: poems, 1962-1965. W.W. Norton. (1966)
Selected Poems. Chatto & Hogarth P Windus. (1967)
Leaflets. W.W. Norton. (1969)
The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970. Norton. (1971)
Diving into the Wreck. W.W. Norton. (1973)
Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974. Norton. (1975)
Twenty-one Love Poems. Effie's Press. (1976)
The Dream of a Common Language. Norton. (1978)
A Wild Patience Has Taken Me this Far: Poems 1978-1981. W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated. (1982)
Sources. Heyeck Press. (1983)
The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New, 1950-1984. W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated. (1984)
Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems. Norton. (1986)
Time's Power: Poems, 1985-1988. Norton. (1989)
An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991. Norton. (1991)
Collected Early Poems, 1950-1970. W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated. (1993)
Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems, 1991-1995. W.W. Norton. (1995)
Selected poems, 1950-1995. Salmon Pub. (1996)
Midnight Salvage: Poems, 1995-1998. Norton. (1999)
Fox: Poems 1998-2000. W W Norton & Co Inc. (2001)
The School Among the Ruins: Poems, 2000-2004. W. W. Norton & Co. (2004)
Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006. (2007)
Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010. (2010)

A Valediction Forbidding Mourning

My swirling wants. Your frozen lips.
The grammar turned and attacked me.
Themes, written under duress.
Emptiness of the notations.

They gave me a drug that slowed the healing of wounds.

I want you to see this before I leave:
the experience of repetition as death
the failure of criticism to locate the pain
the poster in the bus that said:
my bleeding is under control

A red plant in a cemetery of plastic wreaths.

A last attempt: the language is a dialect called metaphor.
These images go unglossed: hair, glacier, flashlight.
When I think of a landscape I am thinking of a time.
When I talk of taking a trip I mean forever.
I could say: those mountains have a meaning
but further than that I could not say.

To do something very common, in my own way.

Adrienne Rich

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

Adrienne Rich

Burning Oneself Out

We can look into the stove tonight
as into a mirror, yes,

the serrated log, the yellow-blue gaseous core

the crimson-flittered grey ash, yes.
I know inside my eyelids
and underneath my skin

Time takes hold of us like a draft
upward, drawing at the heats
in the belly, in the brain

You told me of setting your hand
into the print of a long-dead Indian
and for a moment, I knew that hand,

that print, that rock,
the sun producing powerful dreams
A word can do this

or, as tonight, the mirror of the fire
of my mind, burning as if it could go on
burning itself, burning down

feeding on everything
till there is nothing in life
that has not fed that fire

Adrienne Rich

Cartographies of Silence

1.

A conversation begins
with a lie. and each

speaker of the so-called common language feels
the ice-floe split, the drift apart

as if powerless, as if up against
a force of nature

A poem can being
with a lie. And be torn up.

A conversation has other laws
recharges itself with its own

false energy, Cannot be torn
up. Infiltrates our blood. Repeats itself.

Inscribes with its unreturning stylus
the isolation it denies.

2.

The classical music station
playing hour upon hour in the apartment

the picking up and picking up
and again picking up the telephone

The syllables uttering
the old script over and over

The loneliness of the liar
living in the formal network of the lie

twisting the dials to drown the terror
beneath the unsaid word

3.

The technology of silence
The rituals, etiquette

the blurring of terms
silence not absence

of words or music or even
raw sounds

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed

the blueprint of a life

It is a presence
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence

4.

How calm, how inoffensive these words
begin to seem to me

though begun in grief and anger
Can I break through this film of the abstract

without wounding myself or you
there is enough pain here

This is why the classical of the jazz music station plays?
to give a ground of meaning to our pain?

5.

The silence strips bare:
In Dreyer's Passion of Joan

Falconetti's face, hair shorn, a great geography
mutely surveyed by the camera

If there were a poetry where this could happen
not as blank space or as words

stretched like skin over meanings of a night through which two people
have talked till dawn.

6.

The scream
of an illegitimate voice

It has ceased to hear itself, therefore
it asks itself

How do I exist?

This was the silence I wanted to break in you
I had questions but you would not answer

I had answers but you could not use them
The is useless to you and perhaps to others

7.

It was an old theme even for me:
Language cannot do everything-

chalk it on the walls where the dead poets
lie in their mausoleums

If at the will of the poet the poem
could turn into a thing

a granite flank laid bare, a lifted head
alight with dew

If it could simply look you in the face
with naked eyeballs, not letting you turn

till you, and I who long to make this thing,
were finally clarified together in its stare

8.

No. Let me have this dust,
these pale clouds dourly lingering, these words

moving with ferocious accuracy
like the blind child's fingers

or the newborn infant's mouth
violent with hunger

No one can give me, I have long ago
taken this method

whether of bran pouring from the loose-woven sack
or of the bunsen-flame turned low and blue

If from time to time I envy
the pure annunciation to the eye

the visio beatifica
if from time to time I long to turn

like the Eleusinian hierophant
holding up a single ear of grain

for the return to the concrete and everlasting world
what in fact I keep choosing

are these words, these whispers, conversations
from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green.

Adrienne Rich

Diving Into the Wreck

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers

the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.
There is a ladder
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it's a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans

between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or week

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
and I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he
whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
Obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to the scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

Adrienne Rich

Final Notions

It will not be simple, it will not take long
It will take little time, it will take all your thought
It will take all your heart, it will take all your breath
It will be short, it will not be simple

It will touch through your ribs, it will take all your heart
It will not take long, it will occupy all your thought
As a city is occupied, as a bed is occupied
It will take your flesh, it will not be simple

You are coming into us who cannot withstand you
You are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you
You are taking parts of us into places never planned
You are going far away with pieces of our lives

It will be short, it will take all your breath
It will not be simple, it will become your will

Adrienne Rich

For the Dead

I dreamed I called you on the telephone
to say: Be kinder to yourself
but you were sick and would not answer

The waste of my love goes on this way
trying to save you from yourself

I have always wondered about the left-over
energy, the way water goes rushing down a hill
long after the rains have stopped

or the fire you want to go to bed from
but cannot leave, burning-down but not burnt-down
the red coals more extreme, more curious
in their flashing and dying
than you wish they were
sitting long after midnight

Adrienne Rich

For the Record

The clouds and the stars didn't wage this war
the brooks gave no information
if the mountains spewed stones of fire into the river
it was not taking sides
the raindrop faintly swaying under the leaf
had no political opinions

and if there were a house
filled with backed-up raw sewage
or poisoned those who lived there
with slow fumes, over years
the houses were not at war
nor did the tinned up buildings

intend to refuse shelter
to homeless old women and roaming children
they had no policy to keep from roaming
or dying, no, cities were not the problem
the bridges were non-partisan
the freeways burned, but not with hatred

Even miles of barbed-wire
stretched around crouching temporary huts
designed to keep the unwanted
at a safe distance, out of sight
even the boards, that had to absorb
year upon year, so many human sounds

so many depths of vomit, tears slow-soaking blood
had not offered themselves for this
The trees didn't volunteer to be cut into boards
nor the thorns for tearing flesh
Look around at all of it

and ask whose signature
is stamped on the orders, traced
in the corner of the building plans
Ask where the illiterate, big-bellied
women were, the drunks and the crazies,
the ones you fear most of all: ask where you were.

Adrienne Rich

From a Survivor

The pact that we made was the ordinary pact
of men & women in those days

I don't know who we thought we were
that our personalities
could resist the failures of the race

Lucky or unlucky, we didn't know
the race had failures of that order
and that we were going to share them

Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special

Your body is as vivid to me
as it ever was: even more

since my feeling for it is clearer:
I know what it could and could not do

it is no longer
the body of a god
or anything with power over my life

Next year it would have been 20 years
and you are wastefully dead
who might have made the leap
we talked, too late, of making

which I live now
not as a leap
but a succession of brief, amazing movements

each one making possible the next

Adrienne Rich

From an Atlas of the Difficult World

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a grey day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains' enormous spaces around you.
I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight
but you cannot leave yet. I know you are reading this poem
as the underground train loses momentum and before running
up the stairs
toward a new kind of love
your life has never allowed.
I know you are reading this poem by the light
of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide
while you wait for the newscast from the intifada.
I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
count themselves out, at too early an age. I know
you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
because even the alphabet is precious.
I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your
hand
because life is short and you too are thirsty.
I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.
I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

Adrienne Rich

Implosions

The world's
not wanton
only wild and wavering

I wanted to choose words that even you
would have to be changed by

Take the word
of my pulse, loving and ordinary
Send out your signals, hoist
your dark scribbled flags
but take
my hand

All wars are useless to the dead

My hands are knotted in the rope
and I cannot sound the bell

My hands are frozen to the switch
and I cannot throw it

The foot is in the wheel

When it's finished and we're lying
in a stubble of blistered flowers
eyes gaping, mouths staring
dusted with crushed arterial blues

I'll have done nothing
even for you?

Adrienne Rich

In a Classroom

Talking of poetry, hauling the books
arm-full to the table where the heads
bend or gaze upward, listening, reading aloud,
talking of consonants, elision,
caught in the how, oblivious of why:
I look in your face, Jude,
neither frowning nor nodding,
opaque in the slant of dust-motes over the table:
a presence like a stone, if a stone were thinking
What I cannot say, is me. For that I came.

Adrienne Rich

In Those Years

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves
reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and, yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through rages of fog
where we stood, saying I

Adrienne Rich

Integrity

the quality of being complete; unbroken condition; entirety

~ Webster

A wild patience has taken me this far

as if I had to bring to shore
a boat with a spasmodic outboard motor
old sweaters, nets, spray-mottled books
tossed in the prow
some kind of sun burning my shoulder-blades.
Splashing the oarlocks. Burning through.
Your fore-arms can get scalded, licked with pain
in a sun blotted like unspoken anger
behind a casual mist.

The length of daylight
this far north, in this
forty-ninth year of my life
is critical.

The light is critical: of me, of this
long-dreamed, involuntary landing
on the arm of an inland sea.
The glitter of the shoal
depleting into shadow
I recognize: the stand of pines
violet-black really, green in the old postcard
but really I have nothing but myself
to go by; nothing
stands in the realm of pure necessity
except what my hands can hold.

Nothing but myself?....My selves.
After so long, this answer.
As if I had always known
I steer the boat in, simply.
The motor dying on the pebbles
cicadas taking up the hum
dropped in the silence.

Anger and tenderness: my selves.
And now I can believe they breathe in me
as angels, not polarities.
Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius
to spin and weave in the same action
from her own body, anywhere --
even from a broken web.

The cabin in the stand of pines
is still for sale. I know this. Know the print
of the last foot, the hand that slammed and locked the door,
then stopped to wreath the rain-smashed clematis
back on the trellis

for no one's sake except its own.
I know the chart nailed to the wallboards
the icy kettle squatting on the burner.
The hands that hammered in those nails
emptied that kettle one last time
are these two hands
and they have caught the baby leaping
from between trembling legs
and they have worked the vacuum aspirator
and stroked the sweated temples
and steered the boat there through this hot
misblotted sunlight, critical light
imperceptibly scalding
the skin these hands will also salve.

Adrienne Rich

Living in Sin

She had thought the studio would keep itself;
no dust upon the furniture of love.
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,
a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
had risen at his urging.
Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
so coldly would delineate the scraps
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own---
envoy from some village in the moldings . . .
Meanwhile, he, with a yawn,
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;
while she, jeered by the minor demons,
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found
a towel to dust the table-top,
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.
By evening she was back in love again,
though not so wholly but throughout the night
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

Adrienne Rich

Miracle Ice Cream

Miracle's truck comes down the little avenue,
Scott Joplin ragtime strewn behind it like pearls,
and, yes, you can feel happy
with one piece of your heart.

Take what's still given: in a room's rich shadow
a woman's breasts swinging lightly as she bends.
Early now the pearl of dusk dissolves.
Late, you sit weighing the evening news,
fast-food miracles, ghostly revolutions,
the rest of your heart.

Adrienne Rich

Moving in Winter

Their life, collapsed like unplayed cards,
is carried piecemeal through the snow;
Headboard and footboard now, the bed
where she has lain desiring him
where overhead his sleep will build
its canopy to smother her once more;
their table, by four elbows worn
evening after evening while the wax runs down;
mirrors grey with reflecting them,
bureaus confining from the cold
things that can shuffle in a drawer,
carpets rolled up around those echoes
which, shaken out, take wing and breed
new altercations, the old silences.

Adrienne Rich

My Mouth Hovers Across Your Breasts

My mouth hovers across your breasts
in the short grey winter afternoon
in this bed we are delicate
and touch so hot with joy we amaze ourselves
tough and delicate we play rings
around each other our daytime candle burns
with its peculiar light and if the snow
begins to fall outside filling the branches
and if the night falls without announcement
there are the pleasures of winter
sudden, wild and delicate your fingers
exact my tongue exact at the same moment
stopping to laugh at a joke
my love hot on your scent on the cusp of winter

Adrienne Rich

November 1968

Stripped
you're beginning to float free
up through the smoke of brushfires
and incinerators
the unleafed branches won't hold you
nor the radar aerials

You're what the autumn knew would happen
after the last collapse
of primary color
once the last absolutes were torn to pieces
you could begin

How you broke open, what sheathed you
until this moment
I know nothing about it
my ignorance of you amazes me
now that I watch you
starting to give yourself away
to the wind

Adrienne Rich

Orion

Far back when I went zig-zagging
through tamarack pastures
you were my genius, you
my cast-iron Viking, my helmed
lion-heart king in prison.
Years later now you're young

my fierce half-brother, staring
down from that simplified west
your breast open, your belt dragged down
by an oldfashioned thing, a sword
the last bravado you won't give over
though it weighs you sown as you stride

and the stars in it are dim
and maybe have stopped burning.
But you burn, and I know it;
as I throw back my head to take you in
an old transfusion happens again:
divine astronomy is nothing to it.

Indoors I bruise and blunder,
break faith, leave ill enough
alone, a dead child born in the dark.
Night cracks up over the chimney,
pieces of time, frozen geodes
come showering down in the grate.

A man reaches behind my eyes
and finds them empty
a woman's head turns away
from my head in the mirror
children are dying my death
and eating crumbs of my life.

Pity is not your forte.
Calmly you ache up there
pinned aloft in your crow's nest,
my speechless pirate!
You take it all for granted
and when I look you back

it's with a starlike eye
shooting its cold and egotistical spear
where it can do least damage.
Breathe deep! No hurt, no pardon
out here in the cold with you
you with your back to the wall.

Adrienne Rich

Our Whole Life

Our whole life a translation
the permissible fibs

and now a knot of lies
eating at itself to get undone

Words bitten thru words

~~

meanings burnt-off like paint
under the blowtorch

All those dead letters
rendered into the oppressor's language

Trying to tell the doctor where it hurts
like the Algerian
who waled form his village, burning

his whole body a could of pain
and there are no words for this

except himself

Adrienne Rich

Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff

The autumn feels slowed down,
summer still holds on here, even the light
seems to last longer than it should
or maybe I'm using it to the thin edge.
The moon rolls in the air. I didn't want this child.
You're the only one I've told.
I want a child maybe, someday, but not now.
Otto has a calm, complacent way
of following me with his eyes, as if to say
Soon you'll have your hands full!
And yes, I will; this child will be mine
not his, the failures, if I fail
will all be mine. We're not good, Clara,
at learning to prevent these things,
and once we have a child it is ours.
But lately I feel beyond Otto or anyone.
I know now the kind of work I have to do.
It takes such energy! I have the feeling I'm
moving somewhere, patiently, impatiently,
in my loneliness. I'm looking everywhere in nature
for new forms, old forms in new places,
the planes of an antique mouth, let's say, among the leaves.
I know and do not know
what I am searching for.
Remember those months in the studio together,
you up to your strong forearms in wet clay,
I trying to make something of the strange impressions
assailing me--the Japanese
flowers and birds on silk, the drunks
sheltering in the Louvre, that river-light,
those faces...Did we know exactly
why we were there? Paris unnerved you,
you found it too much, yet you went on
with your work...and later we met there again,
both married then, and I thought you and Rilke
both seemed unnerved. I felt a kind of joylessness
between you. Of course he and I
have had our difficulties. Maybe I was jealous
of him, to begin with, taking you from me,
maybe I married Otto to fill up
my loneliness for you.
Rainer, of course, knows more than Otto knows,
he believes in women. But he feeds on us,
like all of them. His whole life, his art
is protected by women. Which of us could say that?
Which of us, Clara, hasn't had to take that leap
out beyond our being women
to save our work? or is it to save ourselves?
Marriage is lonelier than solitude.
Do you know: I was dreaming I had died
giving birth to the child.
I couldn't paint or speak or even move.

My child--I think--survived me. But what was funny
in the dream was, Rainer had written my requiem--
a long, beautiful poem, and calling me his friend.
I was your friend
but in the dream you didn't say a word.
In the dream his poem was like a letter
to someone who has no right
to be there but must be treated gently, like a guest
who comes on the wrong day. Clara, why don't I dream of you?
That photo of the two of us--I have it still,
you and I looking hard into each other
and my painting behind us. How we used to work
side by side! And how I've worked since then
trying to create according to our plan
that we'd bring, against all odds, our full power
to every subject. Hold back nothing
because we were women. Clara, our strength still lies
in the things we used to talk about:
how life and death take one another's hands,
the struggle for truth, our old pledge against guilt.
And now I feel dawn and the coming day.
I love waking in my studio, seeing my pictures
come alive in the light. Sometimes I feel
it is myself that kicks inside me,
myself I must give suck to, love...
I wish we could have done this for each other
all our lives, but we can't...
They say a pregnant woman
dreams her own death. But life and death
take one another's hands. Clara, I feel so full
of work, the life I see ahead, and love
for you, who of all people
however badly I say this
will hear all I say and cannot say.

Adrienne Rich

Planetarium

<i>Thinking of Caroline Herschel, 1750-1848, Astronomer, Sister of William; and Others</i>

A woman in the shape of a monster
a monster in the shape of a woman
the skies are full of them

a woman "in the snow
among the Clocks and instruments
or measuring the ground with poles"

in her 98 years to discover
8 comets

she whom the moon ruled
like us
levitating into the night sky
riding the polished lenses

Galaxies of women, there
doing penance for impetuosity
ribs chilled
in those spaces of the mind

An eye,
"virile, precise and absolutely certain"
from the mad webs of Uranisborg
encountering the NOVA

every impulse of light exploding
from the core
as life flies out of us
Tycho whispering at last
"let me not seem to have lived in vain"

What we see, we see
and seeing is changing

the light that shrivels a mountain
and leaves a man alive

Heartbeat of the pulsar
heart sweating through my body

The radio impulse
pouring in from Taurus

I am bombarded yet I stand

I have been standing all my life in the
direct path of a battery of signals
the most accurately transmitted most

untranslatable language of the universe
I am a galactic cloud so deep so involuted
that a light wave could take 15 years to travel through me
And has taken I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations into images
for the relief of the body and the reconstruction of the mind.

Adrienne Rich

Power

Living in the earth-deposits of our history

Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth
one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old
cure for fever or melancholy a tonic
for living on this earth in the winters of this climate.

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:
she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness
her body bombarded for years by the element
she had purified
It seems she denied to the end
the source of the cataracts on her eyes
the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends
till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power.

Adrienne Rich

Prospective Immigrants Please Note

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always risk
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

Adrienne Rich

Rural Reflections

This is the grass your feet are planted on.
You paint it orange or you sing it green,
But you have never found
A way to make the grass mean what you mean.

A cloud can be whatever you intend:
Ostrich or leaning tower or staring eye.
But you have never found
A cloud sufficient to express the sky.

Get out there with your splendid expertise;
Raymond who cuts the meadow does not less.
Inhuman nature says:
Inhuman patience is the true success.

Human impatience trips you as you run;
Stand still and you must lie.
It is the grass that cuts the mower down;
It is the cloud that swallows up the sky.

Adrienne Rich

Shattered Head

A life hauls itself uphill
through hoar-mist steaming
the sun's tongue licking
leaf upon leaf into stricken liquid
When? When? cry the soothseekers
but time is a bloodshot eye
seeing its last of beauty its own
foreclosure
a bloodshot mind
finding itself unspeakable
What is the last thought?
Now I will let you know?
or, Now I know?
(porridge of skull-splinters, brain tissue
mouth and throat membrane, cranial fluid)

Shattered head on the breast
of a wooded hill
Laid down there endlessly so
tendrils soaked into matted compose
became a root
torqued over the faint springhead
groin whence illegible
matter leaches: worm-borings, spurts of silt
volumes of sporic changes
hair long blown into far follicles
blasted into a chosen place

Revenge on the head (genitals, breast, untouched)
revenge on the mouth
packed with its inarticulate confessions
revenge on the eyes
green-gray and restless
revenge on the big and searching lips
the tender tongue
revenge on the sensual, on the nose the
carrier of history
revenge on the life devoured
in another incineration

You can walk by such a place, the earth is
made of them
where the stretched tissue of a field or woods
is humid
with beloved matter
the soothseekers have withdrawn
you feel no ghost, only a sporic chorus
when that place utters its worn sigh
let us have peace

And the shattered head answers back

And I believed I was loved, I believed I loved
Who did this to us?

Adrienne Rich

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law

1

You, once a belle in Shreveport,
with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,
still have your dresses copied from that time,
and play a Chopin prelude
called by Cortot: "Delicious recollections
float like perfume through the memory."

Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,
heavy with useless experience, rich
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

Nervy, glowering, your daughter
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.

2

Banging the coffee-pot into the sink
she hears the angels chiding, and looks out
past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky.
Only a week since They said: Have no patience.

The next time it was: Be insatiable.
Then: Save yourself; others you cannot save.
Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm,
a match burn to her thumbnail,

or held her hand above the kettle's snout
right in the woolly steam. They are probably angels,
since nothing hurts her anymore, except
each morning's grit blowing into her eyes.

3

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.
The beak that grips her, she becomes. And Nature,
that sprung-lidded, still commodious
steamer-trunk of tempora and mores
gets stuffed with it all: the mildewed orange-flowers,
the female pills, the terrible breasts
of Boadicea beneath flat foxes' heads and orchids.
Two handsome women, gripped in argument,
each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream
across the cut glass and majolica
like Furies cornered from their prey:
The argument ad feminam, all the old knives
that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,

ma semblable, ma soeur!

4

Knowing themselves too well in one another:
their gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn,
the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn...
Reading while waiting
for the iron to heat,
writing, My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--
in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum,
or, more often,
iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life.

5

Dulce ridens, dulce loquens,
she shaves her legs until they gleam
like petrified mammoth-tusk.

6

When to her lute Corinna sings
neither words nor music are her own;
only the long hair dipping
over her cheek, only the song
of silk against her knees
and these
adjusted in reflections of an eye.

Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before
an unlocked door, that cage of cages,
tell us, you bird, you tragical machine--
is this fertillisante douleur? Pinned down
by love, for you the only natural action,
are you edged more keen
to prise the secrets of the vault? has Nature shown
her household books to you, daughter-in-law,
that her sons never saw?

7

"To have in this uncertain world some stay
which cannot be undermined, is
of the utmost consequence."
Thus wrote
a woman, partly brave and partly good,

who fought with what she partly understood.
Few men about her would or could do more,
hence she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore.

8

"You all die at fifteen," said Diderot,
and turn part legend, part convention.
Still, eyes inaccurately dream
behind closed windows blankening with steam.
Deliciously, all that we might have been,
all that we were--fire, tears,
wit, taste, martyred ambition--
stirs like the memory of refused adultery
the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.

9

Not that it is done well, but
that it is done at all? Yes, think
of the odds! or shrug them off forever.
This luxury of the precocious child,
Time's precious chronic invalid,--
would we, darlings, resign it if we could?
Our blight has been our sinecure:
mere talent was enough for us--
glitter in fragments and rough drafts.

Sigh no more, ladies.
Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition,
every lapse forgiven, our crime
only to cast too bold a shadow
or smash the mold straight off.
For that, solitary confinement,
tear gas, attrition shelling.
Few applicants for that honor.

10

Well,
she's long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.
Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents,

taking the light upon her
at least as beautiful as any boy
or helicopter,
poised, still coming,
her fine blades making the air wince

but her cargo
no promise then:
delivered
palpable
ours.

Adrienne Rich

Stepping Backward

Good-by to you whom I shall see tomorrow,
Next year and when I'm fifty; still good-by.
This is the leave we never really take.
If you were dead or gone to live in China
The event might draw your stature in my mind.
I should be forced to look upon you whole
The way we look upon the things we lose.
We see each other daily and in segments;
Parting might make us meet anew, entire.

You asked me once, and I could give no answer,
How far dare we throw off the daily ruse,
Official treacheries of face and name,
Have out our true identity? I could hazard
An answer now, if you are asking still.
We are a small and lonely human race
Showing no sign of mastering solitude
Out on this stony planet that we farm.
The most that we can do for one another
Is let our blunders and our blind mischances
Argue a certain brusque abrupt compassion.
We might as well be truthful. I should say
They're luckiest who know they're not unique;
But only art or common interchange
Can teach that kindest truth. And even art
Can only hint at what disturbed a Melville
Or calmed a Mahler's frenzy; you and I
Still look from separate windows every morning
Upon the same white daylight in the square.

And when we come into each other's rooms
Once in awhile, encumbered and self-conscious,
We hover awkwardly about the threshold
And usually regret the visit later.
Perhaps the harshest fact is, only lovers--
And once in a while two with the grace of lovers--
Unlearn that clumsiness of rare intrusion
And let each other freely come and go.
Most of us shut too quickly into cupboards
The margin-scribbled books, the dried geranium,
The penny horoscope, letters never mailed.
The door may open, but the room is altered;
Not the same room we look from night and day.

It takes a late and slowly blooming wisdom
To learn that those we marked infallible
Are tragi-comic stumblers like ourselves.
The knowledge breeds reserve. We walk on tiptoe,
Demanding more than we know how to render.
Two-edged discovery hunts us finally down;
The human act will make us real again,
And then perhaps we come to know each other.

Let us return to imperfection's school.
No longer wandering after Plato's ghost,
Seeking the garden where all fruit is flawless,
We must at last renounce that ultimate blue
And take a walk in other kinds of weather.
The sourest apple makes its wry announcement
That imperfection has a certain tang.
Maybe we shouldn't turn our pockets out
To the last crumb or lingering bit of fluff,
But all we can confess of what we are
Has in it the defeat of isolation--
If not our own, then someone's, anyway.

So I come back to saying this good-by,
A sort of ceremony of my own,
This stepping backward for another glance.
Perhaps you'll say we need no ceremony,
Because we know each other, crack and flaw,
Like two irregular stones that fit together.
Yet still good-by, because we live by inches
And only sometimes see the full dimension.
Your stature's one I want to memorize--
Your whole level of being, to impose
On any other comers, man or woman.
I'd ask them that they carry what they are
With your particular bearing, as you wear
The flaws that make you both yourself and human.

Adrienne Rich

Two Songs

1.

Sex, as they harshly call it,
I fell into this morning
at ten o'clock, a drizzling hour
of traffic and wet newspapers.
I thought of him who yesterday
clearly didn't
turn me to a hot field
ready for plowing,
and longing for that young man
pierced me to the roots
bathing every vein, etc.
All day he appears to me
touchingly desirable,
a prize one could wreck one's peace for.
I'd call it love if love
didn't take so many years
but lust too is a jewel
a sweet flower and what
pure happiness to know
all our high-toned questions
breed in a lively animal.

2.

That "old last act"!
And yet sometimes
all seems post coitum triste
and I a mere bystander.
Somebody else is going off,
getting shot to the moon.
Or a moon-race!
Split seconds after
my opposite number lands
I make it--
we lie fainting together
at a crater-edge
heavy as mercury in our moonsuits
till he speaks--
in a different language
yet one I've picked up
through cultural exchanges...
we murmur the first moonwords:
Spasibo. Thanks. O.K.

Adrienne Rich

Victory

Something spreading underground won't speak to us
under skin won't declare itself
not all life-forms want dialogue with the
machine-gods in their drama hogging down
the deep bush clear-cutting refugees
from ancient or transient villages into
our opportunistic fervor to search
crazily for a host a lifeboat

Suddenly instead of art we're eyeing
organisms traced and stained on cathedral transparencies
cruel blues embroidered purples succinct yellows
a beautiful tumor

Adrienne Rich

Women

My three sisters are sitting
on rocks of black obsidian.
For the first time, in this light, I can see who they are.

My first sister is sewing her costume for the procession.
She is going as the Transparent lady
and all her nerves will be visible.

My second sister is also sewing,
at the seam over her heart which has never healed entirely,
At last, she hopes, this tightness in her chest will ease.

My third sister is gazing
at a dark-red crust spreading westward far out on the sea.
Her stockings are torn but she is beautiful.

Adrienne Rich