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ADRIENNE RICH

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM
Since 1951, when she received the Yale Younger Poets prize at the age of twenty-one for *A Change of World*, Adrienne Rich’s work has been characterized – in practice, awareness, intention, and effect – by expansive change. Some of the changes have seemed dramatic, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when even women who rarely read poetry found in *Diving into the Wreck* and *The Dream of a Common Language* a radical new voice. But as the essays in this symposium suggest, change has been, for Rich, a matter of augmentation, not substitution.

As Marilyn Hacker notes, Rich did not so much abandon the accomplished formalism of her early poems as build on it. And when, following the books mentioned above, Rich opened herself to both personal and political concerns that transcended gender in *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), she was not turning from the feminism of recent years, but rather extending the idea of what “the dream of a common language” might mean. Since then, the poems have moved beyond nation to world, as the 1991 title *An Atlas of the Difficult World* suggests. “The poems owe much also the continuing pressure of events,” a note to a 1993-1994 poem says. But no poet has used historical materials more thoroughly than Rich, and no poet has cared more about the future. In *Dark Fields of the Republic*, she wrote: “I wear my triple eye as I walk along the road / past, present, future are all at my side.”

In expanding her territory, both geographically and temporally, Rich has made way for a wealth of materials that include prose, journal-like entries, and extensive quotation from literary as well as non-literary sources, as well as the techniques of photography, film, and collage. At the same time, she has remained deeply conscious and embracing of poetic traditions, among them, as two of these essays suggest, the sonnet and the ghazal. That both of these forms are practiced sequentially is significant: poems in sections and sequences of poems have become a trademark of Rich’s work, and are the subject of most of the essays in the symposium.
Ultimately, Rich’s inclusiveness comes not from a facile vision of universal likeness, but rather its opposite: the earliest poems address the tension between perfection and imperfection, and acknowledge that “We are split, / Done in bits” (“The Insomniacs”). It is precisely by acknowledging splittings, tensions, binary oppositions – between men and women, between art and life, between the powerful and the powerless, between the personal and the political, between tradition and change, between the poet and the reader – that Rich helps us to overcome them.

If, moving into a new century, there are more reasons than ever to despair of such a project, Rich is ultimately a poet of great hope. This year, shortly before this symposium appears, a new volume, *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth*, will be published. A poem from that forthcoming collection defines what Adrienne Rich has done for generations of readers, including those poets in this symposium who have followed her work for years and those who are discovering work that was written before they were born. What Adrienne Rich has written for 56 years is this: “A poem with calipers to hold a heart / so it will want to go on beating.”
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 fertilisante 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.
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.

1958-1960
I wish I could remember when I first read "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." It could have been in 1963, when the eponymous book appeared, but if it had, it would have been a revelation (which I did not have for some years) that other women poets were grappling with the issues I was at twenty, that there might be dialogue and exchange, if not in conversations and letters, in the way a poem in a book calls another poet back to notebook and pen. Like Rich herself at twenty, my literary dialogues on and off the page were largely with men: on one hand, Auden, Lowell, Berryman, on the other, the acolytes of the "San Francisco Renaissance" talking of and reading the work of Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan to their East Coast juniors. I read *Ariel* in 1963, and like other women poets of my generation, I can hear Plathy echoes in poems I wrote subsequently. Rich and Plath (and Anne Sexton) had in common a strong background in and gift for metrical verse and "received forms" upon which they built, elaborated, expanded: for both Plath and Rich, their mature work seems to me much more of an "extension" of this initial achievement than either Sexton’s or James Wright’s abrupt move from metrical towards open forms at roughly the same time. But Rich’s work, from at least her third book on, was and is dialogic, a pole away from Plath’s insistent interiority. To read a woman poet using and subverting the modernists’ collage/quotation/fragmentation techniques — so often employed in mockery of women — in a project of specifically womanly and mordantly feminist inquiry was a heady pleasure. Not to have read this poem at twenty, entered the dialogue then, is a persistent regret, although it was compensated by later discovery.

"Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" was Adrienne Rich’s first overtly feminist poem. One might say that the earlier "Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers" and "Living in Sin" were covertly feminist, but in "Snapshots" Rich not only considered the question of women’s aspirations and achievement directly, she placed it within defining social and cultural contexts which would be equally characteristic of her ongoing poetic/political project (though they
would grow increasingly less Eurocentric, less focused on the En-
lightenment). "Snapshots" is also the first of Rich's equally ongo-
ing series of poetic sequences: non-linear multi-part poems be-
coming verbal holograms of the subject-matter the poet
discovered within them as they developed, from "Leaflets"
through "Twenty-One Love Poems" to "Contradictions: Tracking
central presence in each new collection up through "Tendrils" in
*The School Among the Ruins*.

Though "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" marks the young
poet's break with the more deliberately groomed metrical verse
of her first two books, it is nonetheless informed and, I would
say, strengthened by a shadow presence of the sonnet sequence in
the shape and structure of many of the sections, in the way many
of the strongest lines swell or retract to the pentameter, and espe-
cially by an aptness for non-linear progression, for intellectual
jump-cutting, for building an argument and a narrative with a
cinematic accretion of images, personae, and ideas made coherent
by the numbered breaks in the poem, rather than a linear or nar-
rative stanzaic progression. The line counts of the 10 sections are:
13, 12, 14, 10, 3, 16, 7, 9, 21, 14, not all close to sonnet length and
none precisely sonnet-shaped. But several demonstrate a distinct
volta, the lines following which change direction, sometimes sur-
prisingly, and respond to or comment on the section's opening.
Each section is self-contained, and yet each reflects on all the oth-
ers; the order seems gratuitous but is actually inexorable. There
are numerous memorable lines, even epigrammatic couplets:

a woman partly brave and partly good,
who fought with what she partly understood.

she's long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.

This is a poem, a poet, not afraid of wit, of satire, but the target is
most often and surprisingly those with whom the speaker is most
identified: *ma semblable, ma soeur*. Nonetheless, its critical recep-
tion was virulent enough to discourage the poet from dealing directly with feminist themes, even while her poetry became more immediate in political engagement, for nearly a decade. "A woman feeling the fullness of her powers / at the precise moment when she must not use them," was Rich's assessment in "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus" in 1968.

"It strikes me now as too literary, too dependent on allusion. I hadn't found the courage yet to do without authorities, or even to use the pronoun 'I' — the woman in the poem is always 'she,'" Rich wrote of "Snapshots" in the essay "When We Dead Awaken," some eleven years later. But upon reading the sequence it would be difficult to peg any one of the sections with an autobiographical "I," when indeterminacy — the simultaneous possibility of the "shes" all being one, and of their being different — is part of its power.

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

This might be the "nervy, glowering" daughter (not, in fact, a daughter-in-law) of the previous section, yet the description is nearly congruent with:

Reading while waiting
for the iron to heat
writing, My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun —
in that Amherst pantry where the jellies boil and scum,

in section 4, which is, of course, a depiction of Dickinson (encapsulating her tetrameter line into a narrative pentameter!). There is an "I" in the poem: it is the narrator's voice possessed of and providing all those allusions, angry, disabused, exigent, only hopeful, and not entirely convincingly so, at the conclusion.

The "you," an older woman whose mind is "moldering like wedding-cake" addressed in the opening section, is not the
mother-in-law of a daughter-in-law but the mother of an impatient daughter. In many patrilocal cultures, the role of daughter-in-law is, across social classes, difficult and arduous: a young woman leaves her family home to be installed as dogsbody and scapegoat to her husband’s extended family, often, in particular, to her mother-in-law, escaped by virtue of having borne and married off a son from the same thankless position: rarely are examples given of mothers-in-law who in empathy refuse to put their daughters-in-law through the trials they themselves suffered. Rich might not (yet) have been thinking of Indian or Indonesian daughters-in-law as she composed the poem (the only “mother-in-law” specifically mentioned is “Nature,” from whom, the poem posits, a woman paradoxically stands at far greater remove than “her sons,” like Aphrodite in the myth of Eros and Psyche), but the enforced generational or sisterly enmity between (powerless) women is much more focal to the poem than any relationship with men, who are largely present as sources of misogynistic quotations and damning faint praise. The only direct human confrontation in the poem is in the (14 line) third section’s second septet — although putatively verbal, it is almost erotic:

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 arguments ad feminam, all the old knives
that have rusted in my back, I drive into yours,
ma semblable, ma soeur!

— terminating with the transformed last line of Baudelaire’s poem “Au Lecteur” from the book he first wished (coincidentally) to call Lesbiennes.

“Snapshots” is a commonplace book of quotations and allusions, some in English, some in French or Latin; some complete lines or sentences, some fragmented: Cortot, Baudelaire, Dickinson, Horace, Campion, Mary Wollstonecraft, Diderot, Dr. Johnson, Shakespeare — and surely the line “Time’s precious chronic
invalid” is meant to suggest Alfred de Vigny’s “La femme, enfant malade et douze fois impur.” The helicopter image in the last stanza is borrowed from Simone de Beauvoir’s Le Deuxième sexe, and seems to show both Rich and de Beauvoir at a loss to imagine an actual woman freed from the constraints they chronicle. Rich stated, again in “When We Dead Awaken,” that “The poem was jotted in fragments during children’s naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3AM after rising with a wakeful child. I despaired of doing any continuous work at this time. Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be ‘universal,’ which meant of course nonfemale.” Rich’s awakening to a feminist (and, eventually, socialist) consciousness has been described by the poet herself in prose and in poems, but here I think she was also describing her discovery of a method of composition which has itself become a leitmotif in many later poems: the joining of “fragments and scraps,” whether quotations or described pieces of fabric, bits of pottery dug up on an archaeological site, a yard-sale table spread with salvaged objects — often counterbalanced, as the web of quotations first was here, with an image of speed and distance: the car, the plane, the boat, the helicopter.

It was, when I first discovered this sequence, not only its tentative feminism, but its polyglot, unsparring wit marshalled in the cause of that feminism, even at its outset a difficult and demanding feminism, from a poet and public intellectual who has continued to be “more merciless to herself than history,” never abandoning inquiry, erudition or humor in that scrutiny, that made me remember and keep rereading it. It retains its immediacy and relevance almost fifty years later, as a signal instance of the power of wit in poetry, as a major poet’s entry into and instant, germinal subversion of the modernist canon.
THE BURNING OF PAPER INSTEAD OF CHILDREN

I was in danger of verbalizing my moral impulses out of existence.
– Daniel Berrigan, on trial in Baltimore.

1. My neighbor, a scientist and art-collector, telephones me in a state of violent emotion. He tells me that my son and his, aged eleven and twelve, have on the last day of school burned a mathematics textbook in the backyard. He has forbidden my son to come to his house for a week, and has forbidden his own son to leave the house during that time. “The burning of a book,” he says, “arouses terrible sensations in me, memories of Hitler; there are few things that upset me so much as the idea of burning a book.”

Back there: the library, walled with green Britannicas
Looking again in Dürer’s Complete Works
for MELANCOLIA, the baffled woman
the crocodiles in Herodotus
the Book of the Dead
the Trial of Jeanne d’Arc, so blue
I think, It is her color
and they take the book away because I dream of her too often
love and fear in a house
knowledge of the oppressor
I know it hurts to burn

2. To imagine a time of silence or few words
a time of chemistry and music

the hollows above your buttocks
traced by my hand
or, hair is like flesh, you said

an age of long silence

relief

from this tongue this slab of limestone
or reinforced concrete
fanatics and traders
dumped on this coast wildgreen clayred
that breathed once
in signals of smoke
sweep of the wind

knowledge of the oppressor
this is the oppressor’s language

yet I need it to talk to you

3. People suffer highly in poverty and it takes dignity and intelligence to overcome this suffering. Some of the suffering are: a child did not have dinner last night; a child steal because he did not have money to buy it; to hear a mother say she do not have money to buy food for her children and to see a child without cloth it will make tears in your eyes.

(the fracture of order
the repair of speech
to overcome this suffering)

4. We lie under the sheet
after making love, speaking
of loneliness
relieved in a book
relived in a book
so on that page
the clot and fissure
of it appears
words of a man
in pain
a naked word
entering the clot
a hand grasping
through bars:

deliverance

What happens between us
has happened for centuries
we know it from literature

still it happens

sexual jealousy
outflung hand
beating bed

dryness of mouth
after panting

there are books that describe all this
and they are useless

You walk into the woods behind a house
there in that country
you find a temple
built eighteen hundred years ago
you enter without knowing
what it is you enter
so it is with us

no one knows what may happen
though the books tell everything

*burn the texts* said Artaud

5. I am composing on the typewriter late at night, thinking of today. How well we all spoke. A language is a map of our failures. Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton’s. People suffer highly in poverty. There are methods but we do not use them. Joan, who could not read, spoke some peasant form of French. Some of the suffering are: it is hard to tell the truth; this is America; I cannot touch you now. In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor’s language.

1968
We are born into someone else’s wreck. Someone else’s myth. Someone else’s fire. This is how I read Adrienne Rich, who, in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” speaks through what she calls a burning mouth, uttering from the fire of what she portrays as a tyrannical language, hers by inheritance.

Rich recounts a neighbor’s “violent emotion” as it rises up in reaction to a book burning: “He tells me that my son and his, aged eleven and twelve, have on the last day of school burned a mathematics textbook in the backyard.... ‘The burning of a book,’ he says, ‘arouses terrible sensations in me, memories of Hitler; there are few things that upset me so much as the idea of burning a book.’”

One would think Adrienne Rich might feel the same.

But: “The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me,” she writes. “I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor’s language.” In this poem, there are fires everywhere, igniting and joining each other in a kind of cross-pollination of energy and destruction. They are complicated burnings, evoking an equally complicated emotion — the emotion of “no sensation” — which, in its strange vacancy, arouses the composition of the poem. This disturbance of not-feeling-anything, of being emotionally un-lit by the fires of two boys who burn their schoolbooks, leads to her meditation on the fires that do bring about specific, haunting emotion.

First, a note on fire: Fire can only occur when heat, fuel, and oxygen come together. Scientists call this the “fire triangle.” Removal of one side of the triangle makes the other two sides fall down. Types of fires include candle-fire, a blacksmith’s fire, gas fire, the Olympic fire, the fires of worship, and the fires of warfare. While these kinds of fires are sustained by wick, coal, gas, oil, wood, or chemicals, there is also a fire that uses human lives as fuel.

It is this last kind — fires that feed on people — that Rich has been trying to snuff out during her life as a poet, fires one is born
into, such as the language one is taught by means of authority (for all languages are learned by an authoritarian model, aren’t they? A child calls a thing a table because she is told that is its name, even as she might be taught what “woman” is, or “family,” or “America,” or “aberrant behavior”). Rich acutely feels the fire inside her mouth; it is someone else’s fire, and, as a poet, this is an impossible problem. How is one to remove the human fuel of speech, speech that is the voicing of the “oppressor’s language”? To remove the fuel would, as the scientists tell us, topple this fire triangle. But Rich is a poet, so such a way is not available to her. She must make another way, a mutinous way, a poetics that uses words as renegades casting doubt upon larger conventions, beliefs, and definitions that make up how we speak, write, and, ultimately, love and live.

While it is easy to see how a burning candle sustains its fire triangle (the lit wick, the wax, the airy library), or how the fires of warfare burn on and on (the lie, the oil, the wind of power), this poem wants to show how a fire is sustained inside the mouth. It begins when Rich is given the language of those she calls “oppressors,” but how does such a fire stay hot throughout a life? What oxygen is given to it? Over and over, she says, “I know it hurts to burn.” This fire cannot burn on and on simply by means of fuel. It must be heated and given a feeding draft all throughout a life: Looking “Back there” to the library of her childhood, Rich sees “the crocodiles in Herodotus / the Book of the Dead / the Trial of Jeanne d’Arc, so blue / I think, It is her color // and they take the book away / because I dream of her too often.” The book she desires is the book depicting Joan of Arc’s revolutionary desire, a desire that led to the fiery stake. The removal of the stories that grant the young Rich countercultural options — the female heroine, or even someone a girl could fall in love with — stokes the fire. This “maintenance” of the fire by figures of authority usually includes not only the removal of those thoughts, words, or dreams that are unruly or aberrant, but also their appropriate replacements. And the books and myths given as replacements for the ones removed, more often than not, coincide with the culture of the house, that little society.
This removal and replacement is no small matter. When someone is removed from a language, story, or myth that could give counsel or companionship, his or her nature is, essentially, "banned." At least this is how the scholar of mythology, Joseph Campbell, sees it:

One of the very important, essential ideas in mythology, and in the rites of a mythologically-based culture, is that the individual must be shaped, he must be made to react in a way that that culture wants, and in so shaping the person, the person is removed from his own nature.¹

One must recognize, Campbell says, that a society lives by certain sacrifices of the individual. Some sacrifices are, of course, tiny, easy agreements, such as calling a table a "table." But some agreements are much more costly, amounting to the sacrifice of one’s "nature." It is these kinds of agreements that Rich is unwilling to make, that she sensed were being forced upon her as books were stripped from her library.

Campbell, who often speaks of the mythology given to him by the Catholic church, says that Catholicism almost tore his mind clean through as a child. It caused Campbell great pain that the biblical and ecclesiastical authority under which he was raised was said to be sanctioned by God. This, he said later, was "cooked up," as it has been in every other society that has made such claims — large or small, insidious or charming. Local social orders simply do not have a divine origin, he said.

The dissociation that occurs when a person is asked to believe what she cannot believe — that human life must be lived according to a societal law that goes against one’s better nature, for example, or that the myths of one’s tradition are historically and scientifically accurate — is a dissociation enacted formally in Rich’s poem. The poem is segmented; parts are walled off from

other parts. The life of the library — with its dangerous stories removed — is separated from the erotic life of the poem. Yet, at the same time, the portion of the poem that is an erotic lyric seems to occur as a kind of response to the Trial of Jeanne d'Arc being removed from the library, in the same way that the childhood library is a recollection sparked by two boys burning a mathematics book in the yard. However, the "time of silence" in which intimacy occurs is not a real place in the poem — it is not a library, it is not a backyard — but a place that does not exist. It is a place that Rich says must be imagined. Even when we hide ourselves away, our intimacies are still built by the language we are given: "this is the oppressor's language // yet I need it to talk to you," Rich says. There is no way around it, except, perhaps, to sacrifice human intimacy.

If Rich identifies her vocabulary, grammar, concepts, and definitions as part of the "oppressor's language," then there can be no language that can truthfully occur in the sections of erotic desire, desire that tries to be outside of the oppressor's values and traditions. Whether it is homoerotic desire, adulterous desire, or simply unfettered sexuality, Rich enacts the impossible need to keep the erotic separate from the heft of social, political, and linguistic authorities. What must be spoken is "silence / or few words." Whatever language might be uttered between the lovers comes from a world that does not account for them, or, alternately, that Rich wants to keep protected and unsullied by outside powers. What the erotic life almost grants is "relief // from this tongue," the tongue of the master, the tongue also defined as "this slab of limestone / or reinforced concrete / fanatics and traders / dumped on this coast wildgreen clayred / that breathed once / in signals of smoke / sweep of the wind."

Before the language of this society, there was the language of smoke signals, of natural fires. What Rich longs for is how those fires used to speak, without an "oppressor." That is the fire she wants to return to, a fire made of wood and spark and wind. Not the fire of the burning mouth, fueled by myths, books, and language pressed upon her, heated up and stoked by the removal of the stories that might otherwise save her.
Violently asleep in the old house.  
A clock stays awake all night ticking.  

Turning, turning their bruised leaves  
the trees stay awake all night in the wood.  

Talk to me with your body through my dreams.  
Tell me what we are going through.  

The walls of the room are muttering,  
old trees, old Utopians, arguing with the wind.  

To float like a dead man in a sea of dreams  
and half those dreams being dreamed by someone else.  

Fifteen years of sleepwalking with you,  
wading against the tide, and with the tide.  

One day of equinoctial light after another,  
moving ourselves through gauzes and fissures of that light.  

Early and late I come and set myself against you,  
your phallic fist knocking blindly at my door.  

The dew is beaded like mercury on the coarsened grass,  
the web of the spider is heavy as if with sweat.  

Everything is yielding toward a foregone conclusion,  
only we are rash enough to go on changing our lives.
An Ashanti woman tilts the flattened basin on her head
to let the water slide downward: I am that woman and that water.

9/28/68: i

A man, a woman, a city.
The city as object of love.

Anger and filth in the basement.
The furnace stoked and blazing.

A sexual heat on the pavements.
Trees erected like statues.

Eyes at the ends of avenues.
Yellow for hesitation.

I’m tired of walking your streets
he says, unable to leave her.

Air of dust and rising sparks,
the city burning her letters.

9/28/68: ii

(For Wallace Stevens.

Ideas of order . . . Sinner of the Florida keys,
you were our poet of revolution all along.

A man isn’t what he seems but what he desires:
gaieties of anarchy drumming at the base of the skull.

Would this have left you cold, our scene, its wild parades,
the costumes, banners, incense, flowers, the immense marches?

Disorder is natural, these leaves absently blowing
in the drinking-fountain, filling the statue’s crevice.
The use of force in public architecture:
nothing, not even the honeycomb, manifests such control.

9/29/68
(For LeRoi Jones.

Late at night I went walking through your difficult wood,
half-sleepy, half-alert in that thicket of bitter roots.

Who doesn’t speak to me, who speaks to me more and more,
but from a face turned off, turned away, a light shut out.

Most of the old lecturers are inaudible or dead.
Prince of the night there are explosions in the hall.

The blackboard scribbled over with dead languages
is falling and killing our children.

Terribly far away I saw your mouth in the wild light:
it seemed to me you were shouting instructions to us all.

12/13/68

They say, if you can tell, clasped tight under the blanket,
the edge of dark from the edge of dawn, your love is a lie.

If I thought of my words as changing minds,
hadn’t my mind also to suffer changes?

They measure fever, swab the blisters of the throat,
but the cells of thought go rioting on ignored.

It’s the inner ghost that suffers, little spirit
looking out wildly from the clouded pupils.

When will we lie clearheaded in our flesh again
with the cold edge of night driving us close together?
12/20/68: i

There are days when I seem to have nothing but these frayed packets, done up with rotting thread.

The shortest day of the year, let it be ours. Let me give you something: a token for the subway.

(Refuse even the most beloved old solutions.

That dead man wrote, grief ought to reach the lips. You must believe I know before you can tell me.

A black run through the tunneled winter, he and she, together, touching, yet not side by side.

12/20/68: ii

Frost, burning. The city's ill. We gather like viruses.

The doctors are all on their yachts watching the beautiful skin-divers.

The peasant mind of the Christian transfixed on food at the year's turning.

Thinking of marzipan forget that revolutionary child.

Thought grown senile with sweetness. You too may visit the Virgins.

In the clear air, hijacked planes touch down at the forbidden island.
Pain made her conservative.  
Where the matches touched her flesh, she wears a scar.

The police arrive at dawn  
like death and childbirth.

City of accidents, your true map  
is a tangling of all our lifelines.

*The moment when a feeling enters the body*  
is political. This touch is political.

Sometimes I dream we are floating on water  
hand-in-hand; and sinking without terror.
Were he still alive, Agha Shahid Ali would admit, I think, that it’s an oversimplification to divide the American practice of writing ghazals into two categories: bad ghazals before Shahid vigorously promoted his restoration of the original form, and good ones, composed thereafter. But that attitude is current, I fear, especially with younger poets, who have tended to buy Shahid’s essentialist treatment of this poetic form. I do not propose to explore all the politics, literary and social, that led to Shahid’s project. I simply hope to show, by exploring a group of them, how admirable Adrienne Rich’s ghazals of the late Sixties were and are, and how unfair it would be to dismiss them on the grounds of inadequate formal mastery and/or colonialist appropriation.

A key figure here is the great Urdu poet, Ghalib (1797-1869). 1969 happened to mark the centenary of his death, and Aijaz Ahmad, with support from the Asia Society, was putting together a book of Ghalib translations by various American poets. The book’s publication was preceded by a pamphlet sponsored by the Hudson Review and the Asia Society. This pamphlet, titled simply Poems by Ghalib, contains twenty of Ghalib’s ghazals, ten of them co-translated with William Stafford, and ten with Adrienne Rich.

It is not an exaggeration to describe this pamphlet as electrifying. Both Stafford and Rich produced such brilliant versions of this great poet that even a casual reader can share the excitement of watching a major figure swim into our ken. Here is the third of the ten Ghalib versions by Ahmad and Rich:

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1I refer, of course, to Shahid’s anthology, Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English (Wesleyan, 2000), and especially to his somewhat polemical preface. Full disclosure: I contributed a “correct” ghazal to that anthology and was also guilty of writing ten “incorrect” ones, as the “new poems” section of The Planet on the Desk (Wesleyan, 1991). My “true” ghazal is far less interesting than my “false” ones, at least in my view.
I'm neither the loosening of song nor the close-drawn tent of music;  
I'm the sound, simply, of my own breaking.

You were meant to sit in the shade of your rippling hair; 
I was made to look further, into a blacker tangle.

All my self-possession is self-delusion;  
what violent effort, to maintain this nonchalance!

Now that you've come, let me touch you in greeting 
as the forehead of the beggar touches the ground.

No wonder you came looking for me, you 
who care for the grieving, and I the sound of grief.

This distinctive voice, so willing to risk disjointedness by its 
leaps of association, is of course constrained and directed by its 
use of a complex form. The original is rhymed, but as Ahmad 
notes, that is merely the beginning of the matter: "Each couplet is 
usually independent of any other in meaning and complete in it¬
self as a unit of thought, emotion, communication, etc. No two 
couplets have to be related to each other in any sense whatever 
except formally (one may be about love, the next about the com¬
ing of a season; one about spring, the next about autumn or the 
cruelty of conventional politics, and so on), and yet they form 
parts of a single poem."

No wonder, then, that the presence of rhyme and meter 
should seem so essential to this form. But the Rich/Ahmad trans¬
lation shows us, immediately and by vivid example, that a mys¬
terious unity can in fact be achieved without either. The music of 
this translation is distinctive, the voice asserts a confident coher¬
ence of style and attitude, and no careful reader, I think, would 
wish to have rhyme or meter added to what Rich and Ahmad 
have given us. How many times does it need to be said that 
rhyme and repetition in one language or cultural context cannot 
mean the same thing in another language or context?
Adrienne Rich had quickly sensed the usefulness of this form to her own writing and life situation. She was undergoing large changes, even as her world was changing, sometimes quite violently, around her. Ahmad, meanwhile, notes, “Ghalib lived at a time in the history of the sub-continent similar to the present one in America, in the sense that a whole civilization was breaking up and nothing seemed to be taking its place.” Given this similarity, as well as her own work on Ghalib’s poems, it is not surprising to find that the final section of Rich’s 1969 collection Leaflets is called “Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib.” The results closely resemble the Hudson Review pamphlet, with seventeen ghazals, two to a page, each headed by a date: “7/12/68” through “8/8/68.” In the original edition of Leaflets, the section is headed by this note:

This poem began to be written after I read Aijaz Ahmad’s literal English versions of the work of the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib, 1797-1869. While the structure and metrics used by Ghalib are much stricter than mine, I have adhered to his use of a minimum five couplets to a ghazal, each couplet being autonomous and independent of the others. The continuity and unity flow from the associations and images playing back and forth among the couplets in any single ghazal.

My ghazals are personal and public, American and twentieth century; but they owe much to the presence of Ghalib in my mind: a poet self-educated and profoundly learned, who owned no property and borrowed his books, writing in an age of political and cultural break-up.\(^2\)

Note that Rich considers the section of seventeen poems to be itself a poem, with the implication that the unity/disunity tension

\(^2\)Leaflets, p. 59. In The Fact of a Doorframe Rich would omit four of the ghazals, and slightly shorten the note, now moved to the back and joined with other notes.
that informs the individual ghazals is reflected, in larger terms, in their grouping. That sense is confirmed in her next book with the poem that this essay proposes to explore, “The Blue Ghazals.” Their dating begins at “9/21/68,” as if they were a continuation from where the “Homage to Ghalib” left off, but they are presented as a titled poem and in a new collection, The Will to Change.

I wondered as I returned to these poems how they would feel, almost forty years later. After all, they were deeply embedded in the events of their time, both personal and public. Might that date them? I remember the excitement that surrounded Rich’s work at the time, an excitement associated with her activism in the protests against patriarchal culture and against the Vietnam War. Some literary artifacts from that time have dated significantly. Would Rich’s poems lose interest and energy as well?

Here is where I think the Ghalib connection becomes crucial: Rich recognized that Ghalib’s poems swing a wide enough arc that they can be both of their time and place, very movingly, while also looking beyond, surviving history as lyrics that defeat time and circumstance. We recognize the historical distance in the translation quoted above, but we also respond to its remarkable immediacy. In similar fashion, Rich’s chosen allegiance to Ghalib positions her so that she can be deeply embedded in the moment — hence the dates, as if the poems were journal entries — and at the same time apart from it. The “disjointedness” of the form is the key to success here. It introduces scope without trying to resolve or deny disorder. The poem and the poet manage to have it both ways.

“The Blue Ghazals” is in fact very cunningly constructed. Fully conscious of the order-disorder tensions it will be exploring as part of its recording of a time of change, it dances a dance, using recurring motifs and images, that is fascinating to follow and somewhat difficult to explicate.

The first ghazal, dated September 21, with its unforgettable opening line, has in fact an astonishing unity: it basically says the same thing six ways, recycling its own imagery to reinforce a
world in which dreaming and waking are as confused as the relationship described as “fifteen years of sleepwalking with you.” The strangeness of two people sharing their lives, their dreams, and the confusions of change, inside and out, is completely naturalized, finally, in the image of “wading against the tide, and with the tide.”

The second one, two days later, is more specific to the season, with its “equinoctial light” expanding the familiar characterization of routine (“One day . . . after another”), its dew turning to mercury after cooler nights. The couple’s sense of alienation from each other (“your phallic fist”) and the near-paradox of change and fatality in the fourth couplet resolve to the beautiful image of the Ashanti woman and the sliding water. Can the speaker be both the woman and the water? That assertion embodies another kind of paradoxical understanding.

September 28 produced two ghazals, one that is unified by its characterizing of the self and its relations through the images of a city, in tight rhythms and emphatic images, and one that is addressed, in a more relaxed and contemplative voice, to Wallace Stevens. Why Stevens? Ahmad comments on the Stevens-Ghalib resemblance in this way:

Among Western poets to whom Ghalib may be compared, one thinks above all of Wallace Stevens: all the poems, taken together, create a single, intense impression of a life lived in fact and in mutual relations of facts, in the mind as much as in the imagination, and everything that enters the life also enters, in one way or another, into the poetry of that life. Everything that happens to the poet, either personally or to the times in which he lives, is deeply related to his poetry, but the immediate event is kept scrupulously out of that poetry. The response is immediate and moral, but the urgency is assimilated within privacy, and the response, as it is expressed in poetry, is not so much to the event as to the consequences of that event, to the way it has altered the poet and the experience of the poet.
I quote Ahmad at this length because I think the Ghalib-Stevens-Rich alignment that it implicitly proposes is valuable to any good reader of Rich. She can “converse” with Stevens on familiar terms — “Sinner of the Florida keys” — and wonder how he might have felt about all the protests and demonstrations that were taking place in 1968; she can do this because they share not only the enterprise of poetry but the depersonalizing of experience through images and language, the “It must be abstract” of Stevens’s Supreme Fiction. Across time and across gender, Rich bonds with Ghalib and Stevens, appropriating their exhilarating formula, as described by Ahmad: “For Ghalib, the particular is the universal: a man’s history is the history of his intelligence, plus his emotions, plus his times.”

The next day’s ghazal is addressed to another male poet, Rich’s contemporary LeRoi Jones, now known as Amiri Baraka. Now it is a matter of one poet addressing another in a time of tremendous change, his focus primarily on race, hers on gender, both of them sometimes feeling lost, both of them having enough common experience that even at a distance — a distance partly created, one suspects, by her Jewishness and his notorious anti-Semitism — she can make out some of his shouted instructions. The image “I saw your mouth in the wild light” is a particularly moving characterization of their simultaneous distance and closeness. I might note in passing that Rich omitted the Stevens ghazal and the Jones ghazal from the version of “The Blue Ghazals” that she published in The Fact of a Doorframe.

The next three ghazals belong to December, and again the season — winter, Christmas, and the solstice displacing the earlier autumn and equinox — plays a crucial role. The mood of this group is dark, but not hopeless. It’s as if the change of the year signals a possibility of something better over the horizon.

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3For further engagement with Stevens by Rich, see the thoughtful essay “Rotated Names,” in What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics (Norton, 1993), 197-205. My thanks to Stuart Friebert for calling this essay to my attention.
The December 13 ghazal is cryptic, hedging its assertions — “They say... / If I thought... / They measure...” — and trying to look ahead: “When will we lie clearheaded in our flesh again...?” Closeness may come from distress itself, with “the cold edge of the night driving us close together.”

The opening image of the first December 20 ghazal has always evoked, for me, a double association: with old love letters, tied up in packets, and with Emily Dickinson, whose poems were preserved in those now-famous fascicles. If that’s the case, this ghazal can be read simultaneously as addressed to a former lover and to Dickinson as a kind of ghostly companion. I’m not fully persuaded of this reading, but it’s indicative of the way these poems work, casting associations in all directions as they go, at once intensely private and deliberately public, inviting readers to bring their own associations. In any case, the speaker, as the solstice passes, imagines something that is both mundane — a subway token — and rather epic, an underworld journey taken as “A black run through the tunnelled winter,” invoking myths like those of Orpheus and Persephone, “together, touching, yet not side by side,” a mysterious image that leaves us pondering its possibilities.

Though the second December 20 ghazal is not included in Doorframe, I still enjoy its terse panorama, where the ironic contrasts between “that revolutionary child” whose birthday we have fixed near the winter solstice, and the distractions of doctors, peasants, and sweet-toothed children create a kind of grim humor — “You too may visit the Virgins” — laced with thoughts of the hijackings, most likely to Cuba. To me, this is political poetry of a high order, compressed and clear-eyed, and it survives its original circumstances by virtue of its expansive consciousness of history, politics, and irony.

The final Blue Ghazal is set in early May, the following spring. Its couplets are perhaps the least linked by logic or circumstance of any in the sequence, but that feels appropriate because they seem to summarize the sequence itself, a series of five endings that do not provide relief or closure. The first is an ob-
serivation about a woman, whose identity is undisclosed, an apparent victim of torture. The second is an observation about the police, linking them both to birth and death. The third would seem to point to the poetics of the sequence itself, its mapping of its days and mores: “City of accidents, your true map / is the tangling of all our lifelines.”

The comprehensiveness gives us one emphatic ending. But there are two more fine endings to come. The first links body and feeling to politics, glancing back at the tortured woman and to the panoramic cityscapes and dreamscapes the poem has explored. With “This touch” we can associate the poem itself, almost as though it is a lit match held to our skin.

And while that could be an ending, there is one more to come, linking all the way back to the opening ghazal with its insistent images of dreaming and floating:

Sometimes I dream we are floating on water hand-in-hand; and sinking without terror.

The mystery of that final image reaches out not only to the sequence it concludes but to the entirety of The Will to Change. In those crucial years of America’s troubled history and her own sometimes violent experience of change, Adrienne Rich had her art well in hand, with a rare mastery that meant, among other things, that she knew what she was doing with one of her key resources: the ghazal. In her 1995 collection, Dark Fields of the Republic, Rich revisited the form in the following way:

LATE GHAZAL

Footsole to scalp alive facing the window’s black mirror. First rains of the winter morning’s smallest hour.

Go back to the ghazal then what will you do there? Life always pulsed harder than the lines.
Do you remember the strands that ran from eye to eye? 
The tongue that reached everywhere, speaking all the parts?

Everything there was cast in an image of desire. 
The imagination’s cry is a sexual cry.

I took my body anywhere with me. 
In the thickets of abstraction my skin ran with blood.

Life was always stronger . . . the critics couldn’t get it. 
Memory says the music always ran ahead of the words.

In retrospect she sees the life/art struggle as being won by life, 
the art of the ghazals unable to restrain or sublimate the pulse, 
the sexual cry, the music running ahead of the words. But that, 
paradoxically, allows her to affirm that time of her life and writ¬
ing, the energy and music that acted out their struggle, their tus¬
sle of disorder and order, in her vibrant, expressive lyrics. Art can 
and must reflect “the will to change” because “Life was,” and is, 
“always stronger.”
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 weed

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 this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

1972
I first read Adrienne Rich when a teacher assigned *The Dream of a Common Language* in my high school English class. I was stirred by Rich’s urgency, by her unflinching and wrenching observations on feminism and sexuality, commitment and community. That book, underlined, dog-eared, and battered, remained in my locker long after the English class was over. I dipped into Rich’s nervy imagery as my model when I wrote my first awkward poem about insomnia and submitted it anonymously to my school’s literary journal. Only once did I question Rich. In college, during the ’90s, I was gripped by the throes of multicultural relativism and resisted her vision of a utopian “common language.” I distrusted any writing that insinuated a kind of universal solidarity among all women since I believed female consciousness was fractured and any attempt to carve out a unifying definition for all women was essentialist. Of course, I was confusing essentialism with writing that was essential.

Most poets today speak in “I,” “he,” “she” — they speak from the singular and avoid the plural. Rich has been both roundly celebrated and occasionally lambasted for her courage to address the “all,” to speak from, for and within the “all.” Soon after college I read her most widely anthologized poem, “Diving into the Wreck,” and realized that her aesthetic and political commitment to the collective was what made her poetry so breathtakingly powerful. I was amazed by this poem, by its simplicity and grandiosity, and wished that I had read the poem earlier. Years later, I asked students to bring in their favorite poems, and one of them brought in “Diving into the Wreck.” She read the poem and it was met with hushed silence. There was guesswork about what the narrator was trying to find, and after enthusiastic conjectures, they begged for another listen. So the student read it again.

“Diving into the Wreck” is more allegorical than Rich’s other poems in the collection. The poem spends more time on the process of descent than on the actual destination. Even the terse lean lines and the deliberate cadence of the poem mimic the methodical movement of the diver clamping her way down towards
the wreck. While Rich takes care in charting the inventory of her armor (the knife, the flippers, the camera), the "threadbare beauty" of the wreck, and the sea, remain largely abstract. My students, in discussing this poem, surmised that the wreck could be a metaphor for history, feminist consciousness, sexuality, a lost civilization. Of course, all these conjectures are possible, and it is this open-endedness that I find so compelling in the poem. The whole poem is a slow build-up of the diver's exploration, and then it ends with the "I" metamorphosing into "you" and finally "we": "a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear." The poem feels like a prelude to an epic wherein Rich re-envisions alternative narratives in which "our names" do appear. Of course, the poem is only three pages, but the ending seems to invite a space where other women can rewrite and fill in the body of that epic.

While the poem seems mythological, Rich clearly critiques the myth of official history and the hagiography of the masculine hero. The narrator begins by reading the book of myths, the authoritative tale that purports to be truthful, before she makes her plunge. She departs from a world of equipments that supposedly protect the human body and instruments which measure and codify the material world. Before the diver descends underwater, there's a sense of congestion, that everything above-water has already been explored, defined, and measured. Even the "human air" that she consumes is not pure, but already ingested and recycled by the society around her. Unlike Cousteau and his well-charted, "sun-flooded" explorations, the narrator's journey is obscure and undocumented, and not for the glory of recognition. It is not a quest. It is not an adventure. She embarks on a solitary and private journey.

"Diving into the Wreck" could be read as a passage from the conscious world to the unconscious. But the boundaries between air and water are amorphous — the narrator has no idea where the ocean will begin. But while the material world is a world defined by the symbolic, where myths are spun, the sea is the realm of pure knowledge: "The sea is another story / the sea is not a question of power / I have to learn alone." In that sea, away from
the shroud of the myth, the wreck is utterly permanent and essential: "I came to explore the wreck ... 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 wreck is the kernel of reality that resists representation, truer than the symbols that have been used to define it or the navigation tools that failed to guide it. The diver's exploration of the damage reminds me of Benjamin's Angelus Novus witnessing the ravages of history's catastrophes piling skyward. The narrator's search for the wreck, however, is not exactly a preservationist act, whereby she simply recovers the past. She searches to replace the destructive forces of an exclusionary, obfuscating language with a truer medium of articulation that re-invigorates the future.

Plunging into the uterine sea could be read as a baptismal act, but rather than a conversion where the self becomes whole, the self bifurcates and then becomes multiple. The narrator, once she has reached her destination, becomes blurred in gender and creature: "I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair / streams black, the merman in his armored body ... I am she: I am he." I've heard that Rich was later critical of her decision to change the diver into an androgynous figure, but I find this change to be imperative. The truer self predates the constructs of gender or any compulsory dualities of self/other and subject/object. Once these constructed dualities are eradicated, change can finally be implemented. In place of binary opposition, Rich imagines a self that merges into a kind of feminine multiplicity.

I want to end with a quote by Adrienne Rich about her collection: "I feel this book continues the work I've been trying to do — breaking down the artificial barriers between private and public, between Vietnam and the lovers' bed, between the deepest images we carry out of our dreams and the most daylight events 'out in the world.' This is the intention and longing behind everything I write." The pace of the poem is steered by the diver's stark agency. The speaker asserts her mode of action, as in the lines "I put on" or "I have to learn alone" or "I am here" when
she reaches the wreck. Rich does not equivocate in this poem. She does not hesitate, she doesn’t deliberate even when she reaches the unknowable. Intention burns in every line of this poem, so that every line feels necessary. Much contemporary poetry is characterized by equivocation and irony, so I often turn to Rich for the clarity of intention and her insatiable need to address the all. She breaks down all barriers — between lyric and epic, between activism and aesthetics, between theory and practice, between the political and the private. Unerring engagement powers her poetry and it is an engagement that is beautiful.
MEDITATIONS FOR A SAVAGE CHILD

The prose passages are from J.-M. Itard’s account of The Wild Boy of Aveyron, as translated by G. and M. Humphrey.

There was a profound indifference to the objects of our pleasures and of our fictitious needs; there was still . . . so intense a passion for the freedom of the fields . . . that he would certainly have escaped into the forest had not the most rigid precautions been taken . . .

In their own way, by their own lights
they tried to care for you
tried to teach you to care
for objects of their caring:
glossed oak planks, glass
whirled in a fire
to impossible thinness

to teach you names
for things
you did not need

muslin shirred against the sun
linen on a sack of feathers
locks, keys
boxes with coins inside

they tried to make you feel
the importance of

a piece of cowhide
sewn around a bundle
of leaves impressed with signs

to teach you language:
the thread their lives
were strung on
When considered from a more general and philosophic point of view, these scars bear witness . . . against the feebleness and insufficiency of man when left entirely to himself, and in favor of the resources of nature which . . . work openly to repair and conserve that which she tends secretly to impair and destroy.

I keep thinking about the lesson of the human ear which stands for music, which stands for balance — or the cat's ear which I can study better the whorls and ridges exposed It seems a hint dropped about the inside of the skull which I cannot see lobe, zone, that part of the brain which is pure survival

The most primitive part I go back into at night pushing the leathern curtain with naked fingers then with naked body

There where every wound is registered as scar tissue

A cave of scars! ancient, archaic wallpaper built up, layer on layer from the earliest, dream-white to yesterday's, a red-black scrawl a red mouth slowly closing

Go back so far there is another language go back far enough the language is no longer personal
these scars bear witness
but whether to repair
or to destruction
I no longer know

III

It is true that there is visible on the throat a very extended scar which might throw some doubt upon the soundness of the underlying parts if one were not reassured by the appearance of the scar . . .

When I try to speak
my throat is cut
and, it seems, by his hand

The sounds I make are prehuman, radical
the telephone is always
ripped-out

and he sleeps on
Yet always the tissue
grows over, white as silk

hardly a blemish
maybe a hieroglyph for scream

Child, no wonder you never wholly
trusted your keepers

IV

A hand with the will rather than the habit of crime had wished to make an attempt on the life of this child . . . left for dead in the woods, he will have owed the prompt recovery of his wound to the help of nature alone.
In the 18th century infanticide reaches epidemic proportions: old prints attest to it: starving mothers smothering babies in sleep abandoning newborns in sleet on the poorhouse steps gin-blurred, setting fire to the room

I keep thinking of the flights we used to take on the grapevine across the gully littered with beer-bottles where dragonflies flashed we were 10, 11 years old wild little girls with boyish bodies flying over the moist shadow-mottled earth till they warned us to stay away from there

Later they pointed out the venetian blinds of the abortionist's house we shivered

*Men can do things to you* was all they said

V

*And finally, my Lord, looking at this long experiment . . . whether it be considered as the methodical education of a savage or as no more than the physical and moral treatment of one of those creatures ill-favored by nature, rejected by society and abandoned by medicine, the care that has been taken and ought still to be taken of him, the changes that have taken place, and those that can be hoped for, the voice of humanity, the interest inspired by such a desertion and a destiny so strange — all these things*
recommend this extraordinary young man to the attention of scientists, to the solicitude of administrators, and to the protection of the government.

1. The doctor in “Uncle Vanya“:

They will call us fools,
blind, ignorant, they will despise us
devourers of the forest leaving teeth of metal in every tree so the tree can neither grow nor be cut for lumber

Does the primeval forest weep for its devourers

does nature mourn our existence

is the child with arms burnt to the flesh of its sides weeping eyelessly for man

2. At the end of the distinguished doctor’s lecture a young woman raises her hand:

You have the power in your hands, you control our lives – why do you want our pity too?

Why are men afraid why do you pity yourselves why do the administrators
lack solitude, the government refuse protection,

why should the wild child weep for the scientists

why

1972
I had reason to believe that the vowel O, having been the first heard, would be the first pronounced, and I found very convenient for my plan that this simple pronunciation was, at least as far as its sound, the sign of one of the most ordinary needs of this child. However, I was not able to make any use of this coincidence. In vain, in the moments when his thirst was burning, did I hold in front of him a jug of water, crying eau, eau;... the unhappy child was tormented from every direction, threw his arms around the jug almost convulsively, made a kind of hiss, and articulated not a single sound.

— J. M. G. Itard, De l'éducation d'un homme sauvage (1801)

Rereading this poem for the first time in a few years I am taken aback: I'd forgotten the initial shock of Adrienne Rich's "plain style," how strange it is to slide from the conventional literary device of the epigraph, knowing reminder of the cornucopian clique of books, to opening lines as stark as these:

In their own way, by their own lights
they tried to care for you

No rhymes, no metrics (of course, it was 1973), no enjambment, no figures, no adjectives, nothing "poetic" but the ragged right margin — and the intimate address, the apostrophe, to you. But was that the absent (so absent) savage child of Aveyron, or was it me? The groups of lines set further to the right suggested the wild child in his eighteenth-century environment, with its glossed oak planks and featherbed, but on the left it could have been my own childhood self, learning to speak, learning to care for objects of their caring. Don’t touch that vase! Would you like to try an olive? Put on your underpants! And the riddles on the right were still hard to figure out, years after the success of my formation: what is "a piece of cowhide / sewn around a bundle / of leaves impressed with signs?" Oh! (the next day), yeah, a wallet. Oh, a book!
This is a teacherly method, which turns me into the one who moved Rich to write, the child who gazed so intently and perpetually though the window glass of the Institution, at the meadows and forests beyond, a bad student: always in trouble for looking out the window, for not listening, when to “listen” meant to acquiesce, to obey, to be the Same. But she had me listening now, and answering “Oh!” — the capital word of wonder and also, paradoxically, of understanding.

The language of the poem’s succeeding sections is a little more florid: adult, lexically rich — whorls, leathern, hieroglyph, primeval, infanticide — and I was expected to know that the doctor in Uncle Vanya was obsessed with the deforestation of far-off Russia. But by then I was inside a poem in which I began as the wild child I could still remember being — with the poet’s help, with her care. The poem switches from riddles to anatomy, before moving on to history and sociology, empathic fiction, philosophical questioning. The poet, a bit of a scientist herself, studies the ear, she learns a lesson, she investigates the dreaming brain, she discovers that she doesn’t know something anymore; she is silenced, her throat is cut, she learns history, she reads Chekhov, she tells me about it: her life, like mine, is strung on the thread of language and she tells a story from her life, without punctuation. There is no punctuation in the poem but that of connection: logical or leaping, the colon or Emily Dickinson’s dash.

“Meditations [not on but] for a Savage Child” was the beginning, or the articulation, of a now 34-year-old passion to understand the wild child and those who tried to save it by teaching it language. Feather bed, curtain, wallet. I went and read Itard’s account of Victor in Lucien Malson’s book The Wild Boy of Aveyron (as well as Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya), I saw Truffaut’s Wild Child and Herzog’s Kaspar Hauser, studied the long European history of the figures of the wild man and the feral child, wrote books about the “othering” of monsters, savages, and women, tried to maintain and (excuse the expression) cultivate the alienated wonder of the outsider whose only spoken word, in the end, was “Oh!” I got more cultivated all the time. I wept for the scientists, earned money, learned to adore olives and read several languages, but never wholly trusted my keepers. Men did things to me.
I didn’t have a child of my own, but I have cared for several, and I am finally old enough to see the “Meditations for a Savage Child” as the poem of a mother, one who (like the feelingful Dr. Itard) had seen and understood the deep risks of child-rearing — for the child, and thus for all of us. I never wanted to tame a child; I was just 18 when I first consciously mourned my own taming. And all this time I have been taught and cared for by the “solicitude” of the poet who mourned it too, by means of that most cultivated practice of her art.

The poem is most currently teaching me by the unsentimental completeness of its declaration: it resents as well the abortionist, with his (her?) closed Venetian blinds, and the environmentalist who plants teeth of metal in trees off which the chain saw bounces back, fatally, at the logger. And I am instructed by the daring, which sounds more daring still in these retrograde postfeminist days, of the young woman in section 5 who publicly demands to know from the distinguished doctor why he wants pity as well as omnipotence.

None of the poet’s own questions end with question marks. Read aloud they are declarations, they are accusations, they cut the cord of dialogue: the telephone is ripped-out. The prize-winning poet is no longer a savage child with a silken scar across its muted throat. But like him, she does not hope to learn. She will not read my books. Like her, taught by her, I am speaking anyway. I am a good student now: I resist.

I am writing these words in a café about a mile from the site of Jean Itard’s Institution Impériale des Sourds-Muets. Facing me on the wall is a painting of a wounded, naked man, brought to bay in a forest clearing by the hounds of a huge standing hare with a gun in its folded arms. Scientist or savage child? Either way, I pity him.

Poor Itard. “Oh! how much in that moment, as in so many others, ready to renounce the task that I had imposed upon myself, and regarding as lost the time I was giving to it, did I regret having known this child, and condemned hotly the sterile and inhumane curiosity of the men . . . who would snatch him from an innocent and happy life.”
Oh, poor Victor.

A poem does more than teach and guide. Its solicitude is total, and we need more, or less, as "Meditations for a Savage Child" so richly informs us, than cultivation. If the "Meditations" helped to inspire campaigns like that of Mary Oliver against the value of the human (the preservation of nostra effige, as Allen Grossman reminds us, being the work of poetry), it has done harm, as teaching often does: another teaching harbored in this poem. Section 2, my favorite part of the poem, brings up "the language [which] is no longer personal" and which fails to instruct: the dream, which like the ear's whorls and ridges escorts us, with the poet, into the brain. The brain, obscure object of the scientists' desire, is a cave of scars which bear mute witness "whether to repair / or to destruction / I no longer know." The image of the sleeping poet, no longer mistress of language, parting the leathern curtain, going back in a few short lines to that language no longer personal: how strongly it relieves (or robs) us of Freud and his successors, how deeply tied to our scarred animal origins, all of us, doctor and wild child, poet and reader, speechless and polyglot, lying behind a wholly mysterious leathern curtain, parted by our naked bodies. How beautifully left-alone, unworded, that experience. How unexplained that thickening cave of scars ("why . . . why"), how wild.

Now, as if Rich's "Meditations," encountered at 19, had programmed the life of my adult mind, I am trying to write a book about dreams. It will be a book about dreams and their interpretations in the past, before there were imperial institutions for the deaf-mute, or fascinated bourgeois pursuits of self-development. But I am not sure it can be written. Is that because "when I try to speak / my throat is cut / and, it seems, by [the scientist's] hand"? Or have I become a scientist myself?
THROUGH CORRALITOS UNDER ROLLS OF CLOUD

I
Through Corralitos under rolls of cloud
between winter-stiff, ranged apple-trees
each netted in transparent air,
thin sinking light, heartsick within and filmed
in heartsickness around you, gelatin cocoon
invisible yet impervious — to the hawk
steering against the cloudbank, to the clear
oranges burning at the rancher's gate
rosetree, agave, stiff beauties holding fast
with or without your passion,
the pruners freeing up the boughs
in the unsearched faith these strange stiff shapes will bear.

II
Showering after 'flu; stripping the bed;
running the shrouds of sickness through the wash;
airing the rooms; emptying the trash;
it's as if part of you had died in the house
sometime in that last low-lit afternoon
when your dreams ebbed salt-thick into the sheets
and now this other's left to wash the corpse,
burn eucalyptus, turn the mirrors over —
this other who herself barely came back,
whose breath was fog to your mist, whose stubborn shadow
covered you as you lay freezing, she survived
uncertain who she is or will be without you.

III
If you know who died in that bed, do you know
who has survived? If you say, she was weaker,
held life less dear, expected others
to fight for her if pride lets you name her
victim and the one who got up and threw
the windows open, stripped the bed, survivor
— what have you said, what do you know
of the survivor when you know her
only in opposition to the lost?
What does it mean to say *I have survived*
until you take the mirrors and turn them outward
and read your own face in their outraged light?

IV
That light of outrage is the light of history
springing upon us when we’re least prepared,
thinking maybe a little glade of time
leaf-thick and with clear water
is ours, is promised us, for all we’ve hacked
and tracked our way through: to this:
What will it be? Your wish or mine? your
prayers or my wish then: that those we love
be well, whatever that means, to be well.
Outrage: who dare claim protection for their own
amid such unprotection? What kind of prayer
is that? To what kind of god? What kind of wish?

V
She who died on that bed sees it her way:
She who went under peers through the translucent shell
cupping her death and sees her other well,
through a long lens, in silvered outline, well
she sees her other and she cannot tell
why when the boom of surf struck at them both
she felt the undertow and heard the bell,
thought death would be their twinning, till the swell
smashed her against the reef, her other still
fighting the pull, struggling somewhere away
further and further, calling her all the while:
she who went under summons her other still.

1989-1990
Every time I reread Adrienne Rich’s “Through Corralitos Under Rolls of Cloud,” I enter it under a roll of cloud myself, a roll of cloud the poem itself emits. It’s to me one of the strangest and most eerily transformative of Rich’s poems, evading the logic of common sense at every turn, obeying its own relentless, inexorable, hallucinatory logic. At its core the poem addresses the splitting of the self in two and the death of half of that being: “She who went under,” “she who died on that bed.” Yet by the poem’s end the dead self isn’t dead at all: “She who went under . . . sees her other well,” “she who went under summons her other still.” Under the cloud of that paradox Rich works out the primordial struggle toward wholeness — of living with dead, “survivor” with “victim,” former self with reinvented self, oppressor with oppressed. Rich interrogates that struggle in all its difficulty, ambiguity, and complexity. As readers, we look on the poem’s five twelve-line stanzas as Rich’s speaker regards the pruned apple trees: “in the unsearched faith these strange stiff shapes will bear.”

And bear the poem does, in its double sense of bring forth and endure. That paradoxical double-inhabiting of the word contains within it a crux of the poem: the pain of rebirthing the self, lopping off its weak or dying limbs so that new life can emerge. “It’s as if part of you had died in the house”: what a world is contained within that “as if” as the poem continually works out the logistics of its primary conjecture. After a kind of sickness-unto-death a former self feels dead (as in Dickinson’s many poems of spiritual/emotional death), and a new self — triumphant, prideful, but lost — has claimed dominion and survival:

... if pride lets you name her
victim and the one who got up and threw
the windows open, stripped the bed, survivor
— what have you said, what do you know
of the survivor when you know her
only in opposition to the lost?
The killing-off of the half-self — defined in social-Darwinian-like terms as weaker, more dependent, less life-affirming — echoes uncannily the pruned-back fruit trees of the first section, “the pruners freeing up the boughs / in the unsearched faith these strange stiff shapes will bear.” Rich stiffens the iambic meter with the strange stiff shapes of the triple stress on strange stiff shapes. The poem addresses that painful pruning of the self, lopping off the dying limbs of a self identified with victimization and weakness, to “free up” the boughs for creation of a stronger self. The poem’s urgent sentences tumble unbroken down the twelve lines — indeed, only rhetorical questions have the authority to break the sentences, and then only in two of the five sections.

In keeping with the poem’s uncertainty of the self-in-crisis (“uncertain who she is or will be without you”) the first section is literally subjectless — a series of prepositional phrases indicating direction but not origin: through Corralitos, under cloud, between apple trees, impervious to the hawk, to the oranges. Someone unnamed, perhaps unnameable, is “heartsick within and filmed / in heartsickness around you,” but there’s no I here, only a distanced, soul-sick, insubstantial You, to whose passion the landscape is indifferent: “stiff beauties holding fast / with or without your passion” (and here passion suggests both suffering and desire).

Section I having set us up for a meditation on suffering, on heartsickness, but also on spiritual, emotional, political rebirth, we’re plunged then into the second section’s subjectless participles: showering, stripping, running, airing, emptying, all again addressed to “you.” But this section turns out to be addressed not to “this other who herself barely came back,” but to the dead self. The apostrophe to the dead resurrects her, in a way, as Rich’s narrator refuses to accept that the victim-self has been pruned, has “gone under.” But the surviving aspects of self — “this other who herself barely came back” — are damaged, unidentified (hence the subjectless sentence structure), “uncertain who she is or will be without you.”

Section III continues to address a You, but now the poem speaks to the other half of the dead/living, victim/survivor binary. So the you and the she, the dead and the living, have
switched places, one of Rich’s several brilliant syntactical moves that re-fuse the severed selves, remind us of their inevitability to each other, their mutual self-dependence. Emotional survival doesn’t mean killing-off of weakness, but acknowledging one’s link to the victimized and oppressed. Where in section II the living self had been left to “turn the mirrors over” (in folklore and in Jewish practice mirrors must be turned to the wall after a death to prevent the spirit from being drawn back into the mirror and losing its way into the afterlife), here Rich’s narrator insists that survival requires self-scrutiny:

What does it mean to say *I have survived*
until you take the mirrors and turn them outward
and read your own face in their outraged light?

Suddenly here what looked like an interrogation of psyche becomes in addition a meditation on history, as the poem turns the potential narcissism of introspection into the extra-spection of history: the interior drama of victim and survivor becomes part of a meditation not on personal survival and rebirth but on all the atrocities of history. The poem turns against personal pity and insists we turn rage outward from the inner drama to the “outraged light” that allows us to see our personal dramas as part of the global and historical forces, the outrages of history that so populate *An Atlas of the Difficult World*: the Holocaust, the murder of a lesbian, lynching, “the surgeon’s probe left in the foot,” “Wounded Knee, Los Alamos, Selma, the last air lift from Saigon.”

Outrage: who dare claim protection for their own amid such unprotection? What kind of prayer is that? To what kind of god? What kind of wish?

So the drama of the interior, the split self, becomes the drama of history: the unacknowledged responsibility of survivor for victim, the secret twinship of privileged and disempowered. No “little glade of time” is promised us, no secession from the outrages and abominations of history. Rich’s “outraged light”
makes us read our own faces amid the "unprotection" of the vic-
tims of atrocity and injustice throughout the world and through-
out human history; selfhood, imagined as a retreat from history,
is revealed as inexorably entwined with the sufferings of others.

When Rich returns, then, to "She who died on that bed" we're no longer talking about the dying-off of a weaker part of
the self: Rich has reinterpreted the mysterious struggle for sur-
vival between two parts of the psyche in light of global struggle
between oppressed and oppressor, empowered and powerless.
The self remains split between identification with survival and
strength and identification with the oppressed and defeated.
"She who went under," though purportedly perished, "sees her
other well" (perceives clearly her other; witnesses the flourishing
and well-being of her other). Indeed, if double-meanings (well,
still, bear) suggest an irrepressible difference between seeming
identicals, rhyme suggests an irrepressible likeness, for pruned
and saved, victim and survivor, privileged and disempowered,
are inextricably bound. The poem's primordial split is ultimately
denied. In the "outraged light" of her moral outrage over histor-
ical/political atrocity, Rich reinserts the self into history; the
poem retwins the surviving lyric self with all those destroyed
selves who "went under" in the Holocaust and manifold other
oppressions of power. "Who dare claim protection for their own" amid the manifold unprotections this searing book records.

The poem's relentless full and off-rhyming in its last section
(shell, well, well, tell, bell, swell, still, while, still) insists through
its very form on the redoubling and reconnection of the severed
parts of the self and of the severed moral connection between
privileged survivors and disempowered victims. "Victim" and
"survivor," living and dead, are intermixed with each other as the
rhyme intermixes and duplicates the sound of the words. "She
who went under," "she who died on that bed," remains conscious
and perceiving: she "sees it her way," "peers through the translu-
cent shell / cupping her death" (with death now figured not as
destruction but as egg, a birth image calling back to the heart-
sickness-as-cocoon image of the first section), "sees her other
well," "well / she sees her other," "thought death would be their
twinning." But the twinship is already there and irreplaceable. Indeed, the poem's last lines confuse "she" the supposedly drowned self and "her other" the supposedly surviving self syntactically, so that by the time we reach "calling her all the while" it's grammatically ambiguous who is calling whom: again "self" and "other" have merged as Rich insists on the moral interconnection between victor and defeated, empowered and suppressed. Survivor is "calling her all the while" while "she who went under summons her other still." Surviving self is called into ongoing attraction by the unacknowledged twinship of dead and living (still summons her other) and continually called downward in a siren-song into death and stillness ("summons her other still").

The rolls of cloud the poem shrouds itself in, then, are ways of dismantling binary thinking: personal and political, self and other, living and dead, interior psychological crisis and exterior political crisis. Near the ending of An Atlas of the Difficult World, "Through Corralitos Under Rolls of Cloud" meditates on the gallery of psychic, political/historical wounds the volume so unflinchingly confronts, and turns the mirrors of narcissistic self-scrutiny outward to make self acknowledge identity with other in their outraged light.
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.

1990-1991
"WHERE ARE WE MOORED? WHAT ARE THE BINDINGS? WHAT BEHOOVES US?"

In a very late poem entitled "Old Age's Lambent Peaks," Whitman writes of experiencing "the touch of flame — the illuminating fire — the loftiest look at last." While many of the poems of Whitman's old age bemoan its frailties and infirmities, "Lambent Peaks" is a redeclaration of the younger Whitman's passionate visionary urgency. He seems empowered again, to have stepped through a refining fire — but only briefly, for much of the poem's imagery is crepuscular. The conventional wisdom has it that Whitman's later poems are weak and self-imitative, and I fear that even many of the readers who count themselves as Adrienne Rich partisans are apt to make the same sorts of characterizations of Rich's most recent period, the one which begins, roughly, with the 1991 collection, An Atlas of the Difficult World. But the conventional wisdom is never more than partly true. In a searching essay on Whitman that he was at work on at the time of his death, Robert Creeley offers a spirited defense of later Whitman, whom he characterizes as writing "with a habit so deep and familiar it no longer separates from him as an art or intention."

That "habit so deep and familiar" seems also in evidence in late Rich, and in its finest manifestations it emerges as a poetry that is at once oracular, social, and personal. Rich has surely not "mellowed" in old age, for she continues to write in a manner of sustained ferocity. But her prophecies are now uttered from perspectives where only the loftiest looks seem possible, looks which are informed, above all, with an awareness of mortality and a spirit of leave-taking. The various struggles against injustice which have so preoccupied this poet will of course continue, but they will be waged by others. In "(Dedications)," section XIII of the title poem of An Atlas of the Difficult World, we see Rich bestowing her prophet's mantle on those others, an occasion which calls for ritual, surely, but which also calls for some of Rich's most Whitmanic tropes.
Rich’s project in *Atlas* parallels that of George Oppen in his crucial sequence “Of Being Numerous.” How does the self confront what Oppen calls “the shipwreck of the singular” — in itself a considerable enough undertaking — while at the same time finding a credible means to give voice to the polis? And both writers know acutely that these goals are stymied more than anything else by the bitter inequalities which are the legacy of late capitalism, and by a power structure that leads the nation repeatedly to meaningless warfare — Oppen writes “Of Being Numerous” at the height of the Vietnam conflict, and Rich authors *Atlas* during the first Gulf War. The “map of our country” that Rich surveys in an early section of the poem portrays an underclass who labor in desperation and a moneyed class who have fallen into lassitude: “These are other battlefields Centralia Detroit / here are the forests primeval the copper the silver lodes / These are the suburbs of acquiescence silence rising fumelike from the streets / This is the capital of money and dolor....” Over the course of the 26-page poem, the speaker alternates such jeremiads with efforts to come to terms with her own past, her own career as activist and writer, yet these efforts never devolve to mere solipsism; the speaker’s malaise and the country’s plight are linked in some ineffable but essential manner. As she asks in a passage which becomes a kind of refrain in the sequence, “Where are we moored? What / are the bindings? What be- / hooves us?” Rich’s answers to these questions come in section XII of the poem and are meant to be provisional and pragmatic, evidence of the speaker’s struggle as much as they are solutions. They also take the form of the old emotional verities — “a beauty built to last / from inside out,” a lover’s “woman’s hands turning the wheel or working with shears.” From this arises the poem’s thirteenth and final section, and in it the boundaries between self and world are at least partially dissolved, not by the poet’s own efforts, but by the redemptive power of poetry itself. This transformation is accomplished in part by the poem’s incantatory refrain: “I know you are reading this poem....”

We may hear in Rich’s catalogue some obvious echoes of Whitman, but I would like to stress the difference between Rich’s
intentions and those of Whitman, for whom empathy often seems to give way to an effort at self-replication: to read Whitman you are expected to become Whitman. Rich conceives of the relationship between poem and reader as more mysterious and transactional. Rich’s cast of readers come to poetry at times of reckoning and personal crisis, and for them “this poem” gives unique counsel. To borrow a phrase from Mandelstam’s great essay on reading, “To the Addressee,” the reader of the poem has become “the one hailed by name.” And the intimacy of this transaction is seen by Rich as a fundamental source of poetry’s transformative power. The poem does not so much develop this argument as allow its force to deepen, thanks to the relentless particularity of its examples. The gift of this poem is easy neither to bestow nor to receive. It is the same injunction for self-transformation that Rilke asserts at the end of “Torso of an Archaic Apollo” — the ending of “Atlas” may in fact be seen as a kind of homage to that poem, but shorn of Rilke’s mysticism and grandiosity. It is not easy to change your life, Rich insists, and the process is only beginning:

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.

The poets of greatest ambition of course set high-minded goals for themselves, but I sometimes think that Rich is unique among contemporary writers in that she holds her readers to the same austere standards that she holds for herself. These demands are not aesthetic ones; she is not a difficult poet, not an hermetic one. She asks instead that we aspire to her own sternness and moral authority, and, as An Atlas of the Difficult World attests, these are very high standards indeed.
A more terrible and brutal grief seized the heart of Demeter

Withdrawing from the assembly of the gods

she went among the cities and fields of men.

***

Preface: Demeter Invents

Not even the black shine

in the trees heard you

slide away

blood locket.

Up in the scorchlight I invented

the audible for you :

nursery rhyme alphabet song

counting game hide-and-seek

question where

did you go.
Eleusinian for Beginners

Stranded is not the word I'd use.
More like: with, without. What kind of place?
No, no: not what kind, but how.

Demeter Settles

Everything I own fits in a suitcase the size of meanwhile, stuffed with light I can't use.
At first I unpacked nothing but a new idea I held in the fire as long as I could.
Little sword, I said, better get tempered.
But there were interruptions, fatal flaws, beautiful all the same. They told me,

Live in the almost, this Eleusis.
You can.

Another View of the Origin of the Mysteries at Eleusis

It was the best I could do something never enough on fire something thrown down and loved.
Reasons to Build the Temple in Eleusis

Somewhere to put the didn’t quite someplace to keep the boats I use running the chain of sorrowpools.

***

Little Famines

Shutdown seeds don’t open

\[ I \text{ lost} \quad \text{where} \quad \text{did} \quad \text{how} \]

\[ \text{can} \quad \text{she is} \quad \text{without} \]

They add up, the pulled-under. You’ll have to dig way deeper to find the live one now.

***

Initiant’s Song

Show me why it’s all right, the is-then-isn’t. Bring it into the visible’s little circle of yellow light.
What I lost is ringing  
like a bell but somewhere else,  
so tell me  
what’s in the shut basket  
in the middle of my life.

***

Mid-Winter, Eleusis

I almost forget what I was waiting  
for leaning up against  
the marble house just this.

There’s water running  
somewhere how is it  
unfrozen how do I  
hear it your construction  
project’s suspended.  
Take off that hard  
hat and be made.

***

Demeter Reconsiders

You fell  
through the earth’s flowering trapdoor,  
and I learned to love winter’s privacies, the being  
nowhere to be seen.

But is that you now,  
rattling the cage in the orphanage  
that underlies everything,
you saying I'm back, I'm back, with your bare foot on the first rung of spring's hard green ladder;

is that spring's green fist in my chest.

***

Hadean Flora: Demeter Speculates

The light there maybe
house lilacs species
labeled What-You-Don't-Know.
She might come carrying some.

***

What Else She Might Come Carrying

Her own shut basket
which stone gifts
whose voice calling her
what first name.

***

Demeter Dreams

The dream plummets into the
black water I never knew
was passable I thought
was black rock

So what was it like
the time away
with nothing but
world to catch you
You say
I ate
the everyday  every  red seed
You say
I ate
I grew

***

New Map of Eleusis

The sky's glass
lock cracks  earth's black leather door
swings wide

Can you see now
how each life leads in two directions  away
and away
NOTES


**Demeter Settles:** According to the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, after her daughter Persephone is abducted by Hades, Demeter goes to the Greek city of Eleusis, where she disguises herself and becomes the nursemaid to the son of the ruling household. She decides she will make the child immortal by burying him in the hearth-fire every night, while the household sleeps. However, the child’s mother, Metaneira, wakes one night and, not knowing Demeter’s intentions, cries aloud and interrupts the process.

**Another View of the Origins of the Mysteries at Eleusis and Reasons To Build the Temple at Eleusis:** After Metaneira interrupts Demeter’s efforts to immortalize her child, Demeter casts the child to the ground; his sisters pick him up and attempt to comfort him. Demeter reveals herself and asks that the Eleusini-ans build a temple for her where she will teach them her Mysteries, religious rites that offer initiates a happier existence on earth and in the afterlife.

**Initiant’s Song:** One aspect of Demeter’s Mysteries involved the carrying of a closed basket containing ritual objects.
September flags in fog. The sea sighs into cloud. 
Sea wind salts the burning mountain fields
And the islands disappear.
Shark-spines of rigging vanish into air.
The port itself drowns in the air.

Unearthly peace — or so, at his desk, he'd imagine
If he could stop his ears against the siren-calls:
Dampened but unquenchable he hears
Claxons, ambulances, all the city's usual
Wails of alarm and indignation.

And then, far off, bells summoning that other peace
He's never felt himself because it seems
A refutation of his sense, though he believes
Humans could do worse than trust
In visions of a baby smiling at its mother's breast.

He lights a cigarette. Fog settles into rain.
They could do worse. His dossier opens to a woman
Seen last with child soldiers behind some trees.
He knows, he knows why hope for some must be inhuman.
He smokes, listening to the city he can't see.
SELF-PORTRAIT AS DISGRACE

Solved the problem of sex — he is old Enough to be her father. He has been On her books. Thursday is an oasis. She is quiet, quiet and docile. She is Offended by tourists who bare “udders.” He likes giving her presents. He enjoys Her pleasure. When asked her story She asks him to keep to his own story, To what happened to him. Call no man Happy until he is dead. Call no woman Happy. He wants to lie on her and protect.
Kary Wayson

POPPIES

Hair in the brushes, in the bread bag, snagged in my bracelet
and clogging the kitchen drain. Your hair
and how it hangs, your face and how it falls
— your throat, how thick: your feet. Your fuse.

Your body and my body and the mark on the wall above the bed
— one crow
sticks

and cracks — a black sip from a flask. How grass grows geese

from goose. Water

and the way it floats
the gulls and bugs

and boats. Your will and what I want —
which words when, where and whether or not

I’m home.
You’ve got me ringing like a neighbor’s telephone.
T. Zachary Cotler

YOUR BROTHER IN THE TREES

I rode in the maple
trees, following

a creek. Some books
with me, some work to do.

Books you would like,
I think. I found a mushroom

larger than your two hands. A cottage
with a waterwheel — the window broken,

and the wheel turned. I
wrote a longer letter

there. I sent you this.
Anne Marie Macari

d from THEIR EYES WERE OPENED

XXXIII

If you believe in ice and thaw, in fields, woodlands, in leaves falling where they were always meant to fall, like hands clasped around trunks and along gullies, the road swerving toward nowhere. If you believe in a secret north luring these thousands of Snow Geese, their blue and white underwings above our heads. If you believe you’ll be called again to the carnal belly, that you’ll answer the failing light with your reed mouth, crying like the geese, feathers growing stiff on your throat, a flight down into grit and dirt, home of silt, water, abandoned oval shells — I’ll be with you — with you unto the last shelter.
XXXIV

Darwin came seasick into paradise. Packing the ship with crates of fossils, plants, dead birds, anything he could kill or dig up. Five years collecting, ten to sift through it all. And in the brain's bright cell a viscous humming, the terrible doubts. Later, when the favored child died, when she moved through the first wilderness without him, Annie decomposing into chalky layers — no comfort. Just hymns of transmutation, songs of barnacles, earthworms, finches, and the lonely tortoise. We are parasites inside parasites, and some have wings. Annie on shore, as he lurched seasick into paradise.
XXXV

After ages of watching over, of shearing and slaughter, we lay down in the field to the echoes and tremors of sheep yanking the rough grass. Soon we dreamed we’d become the grass that the sheep gripped with their small teeth, slowly chewing us from the hairs of our legs to the flesh of our bellies, picking at our ribs, warm breath grazing our hearts. The sheep ate the delicacy of eyes and cheeks. And when the seams of our skulls cracked open, flying things descended on our remains. Too late to wake up. Easy to let go. Torn to bits and no mouths left to thank them. Given at last to the happiness, that we had long forgotten.
XXXVI

She heads into the wilderness, weeping and stunned by shame, her eyes open. Into another country, bent and becoming, fibrous and heavy in her body, feeling that she is the tree, or that she is the fruit that ripens and falls, that falls and will keep falling her whole life. As if all that mattered was plummeting to earth and splitting open.

And who hasn’t stumbled out of herself into the body of suffering? Into bare flesh, stooped shoulders, and the dark hole of the mouth. Threats still ringing, and that taste she never forgot, taste with no end, world with no end. Gates fading, the wind shushing her on.
Li Qingzhao

TO THE TUNE OF “A GOOD THING NEARS”

Wind stilled — after, a depth of fallen petals.  
A red piled up like snow, beyond the curtain.  
How true that only after the begonias  
Is the season for mourning spring.

Now dry and quiet, and carafe empty,  
Only the green lamp flickers.  
My wisp of a dream couldn’t endure,  
And that one cry of the sparrow.
TO THE TUNE OF “PLAINTIVE”

Nightfall, deep stupor, slow to strip off make-up.
A spray of plum blossom left in my hair.
Sobered up, I awake from its smudging,
Breaking off the dream before I return to him.

Human voices still, moon clings, curtain hangs,
the color of malachite.
Let me again pick at the buds that remain.
And toy with the lingering scent.
And make some gain in time.

translated by Kevin Tsai
UNVEILED

We enter September shattered, assembling Saint X in our cell.

We compare copies of copies in search of original; we hear rain contemplating the elm. She is blind in one eye. I am bleeding dry soil. Together we lift and release, weighing the lost and almost and not yet unveiled. With mindful motion we weary ourselves. Here in our windowless cell.
KOAN

Somewhere between here and Mecca, California, in the ancient metallic dark, a man stands on a hill looking out on a valley of vibrating light and people night-settled, people tucked in and shuttered, vaguely fearing new tremors, fearing bursts in the dark in Korean on the message machine, sated on the news they drink until midnight, more or less at home with the gun, more or less at ease in tumultuous stillness.

Somewhere between Mecca and here unthinking begins, the gap between seeing and seen drops away and irony and martyrdom end: and truth too is moot and the heat that can kill you, and mudslides and floods and fasting at feasts in hair shirt and breeches, eaten, not eating.

The man wants the koan but koans are words and words don’t apply. The man has filled himself empty; he is almost completely not hungry; he has returned limping a little to find these last drops in the pail.

At the edge he remains. He is fading, it seems. Over the thistle and dazzle he hears what he thinks must be sunrise, unfolding unapproachable light.
Meanwhile, belief elsewhere enough abounding. Ritual’s not what I mean, though — or not exactly. Not the bones of ceremony, either: insufficient, finally, to our longing now to fill a space, and now — getting filled — to be the space itself . . . But as when the body lies restless, votive, in a nakedness with which holiness has at once everything and very little to do.

What does it matter that, for the ghost majority, the god Apollo likely never existed, slaughtered no one, strung nobody’s body up from some wild and half-broken-looking olive tree, the flayed limbs going steadily more vintage in what there was, still, of any light at all,

if you know better than that, if I’m everything you wished for?
As when a long forgetfulness lifts suddenly, and what
we'd forgotten — as we look at it squarely, then again
refuse to look — is our own

inconsequence, yes, it was
mostly like that, sex as both an act of defacement and —
as if the two were the same thing — votive offering,
insofar as the leaves

also were a kind of offering, or could
at least be said to be, as they kept on falling the way leaves
do: volitionless, from different heights, and in the one direction.
GOLD ON PARCHMENT

The rocks here are volcanic. They rise from the sea — stand above it — only to be covered by it, and then disclosed again in the wave's receding. The waves sheath the rock's face with departure's pattern — then the pattern goes too . . . Earlier, when the tide was low, you could have seen a lone egret walking the zones between the rocks: entirely white; hunting; what was it hunting? Where were you? The waves broke further from shore, so what passed now between the rocks was all sea-foam, its white the same white as the egret's, against it the bird seeming, a moment, to have disappeared, invisibility seemed a thing worth envying, though I do not forget, mostly, the difference between the kind of invisibility one can wield — a form of power — and the other kind, that gets imposed from outside, and later fastens like character, or dye, as if invisibility were instead a dye, and the self a spill of linen, Egyptian cotton: whore —

Wave covers rock, and then draws back, recessional. The rock glistens with it. Pretty, isn't it? — Isn't it? In the day, it's like a boy's hand passing somewhere between leisurely and impatiently back through his hair again, until it lies in the place that — today, at least — he thinks he'd like it to forever. Your hand still does that . . . But in the night — even a moonless night — the wave passes not like a hand at all, but like recognition, as when the mind at last recognizes the body's corruption as absolute and (unlike a wave) irreversible, and the body — or the mind's idea of it — re-emerges, stripped of its former willfulness, perhaps, but not of its will to be free, more free, and not of its indifference to the costs of freedom. Memory as a space, like any other, to be crossed or not crossed, regretless, any time we choose — I remember that. We called ourselves the lucky ones. Called the sea — the sea: we could turn our backs to it.
Joseph Campana

MIDDLE WINTER

The bicycles swim in snow, they
drown. Everyone rushes off as if to
sale: it's precedents' week: old men
hit their heads on icicles. I slip into
reflections: reluctance drips down into
pools. It's unseasonable for this time
of government. Snow ploughs sing
sweetly and blink: hello, dolly!

I've come to take you out in a bale
of hay: aren't you hungry? I've got
plenty here to feed the sheep. Look:
meadows fill with bodies like snow:
bodies fill like meadows with snow.
One seal burps
and gurgles as if congested or that’s the way it says
whatever it’s saying. Such a wet,
meaty burst. It’s gone. There’s no wind.
Even the rocks
are breathless. As if sound is as visible as anything
looked at, I leave Dory Cove
and walk up to Sharon’s with so many images in mind,
my mind has split. Like red oak.
There’s heat still
in the cookstove. Things happen. At once
I’m sitting with a hundred stonemasons — Italian, French,
Germans, less a person
than a chisel & hammer, which
doesn’t make me moral. Everybody knows that
when a river breaks
it leaves an island. But now the oxen
who haul the stone are talking
with the seals — it’s November, hardly a cloud —
about winter, music, places
so real they forsake reality. There’s nothing else to do
but listen.
OLD DOG

It seemed to grow us tails, it seemed to make us wag them

each time he took a blade or two of grass — the licks, the snaps of jaw —

then sat again or sniffed a minute, and lay down and began to pant,

and glanced over the creek, maybe at the butterflies in the blossoming weeds, or at

the water’s double in the light of the leaves, his abdomen rising

and falling in time with the dove coo & the train, and sometimes his head

was flat on the ground, earth at chin-level, or he lifted it and sniffed,

licked his paw or snapped at a bee, maybe standing again, maybe adding a line

to that song, you know, the one you’re breathing, the one you’re standing on, singing.
The trick is the trick the wild creature, captured and caged, remembers and turns to, staring as he does unmoving, facing, without seeing, the bars of his cell and us.

He departs this place, enters the circling archives and depths of his own body, finds the woven forest, the damp rank of its layered mat, the shadowed hues and run of the river, cadence of its current and cold, peppery scent of cutbanks, silty richness, soaked mosses, snailey muds, the forgiving lap and sand of its bar.

He feels the imperceptible rise and fall of the woods as a breathing he breathes in sleep, haphazard slip of a leaf, jitter of a twig, single hairs of hedge rubbish and withered petals shaken loose by the wind filling and bolstering all crevices and hollows with the theology of its coming and going.

He pads slowly beside the moving waters, sniffs the array of oak, hickory, sour mint, markings and decay, hears a contrapuntal play of fading caws in the distance, a closer creak and rub of branch against branch.

He takes the fancy grasses of the clearing into his mouth, licks the liquid sugar of their graces. He is the light of the sun, its pelt and paw, its crude warmth and rigor. He creates its story in his passing. He makes the sound of its soul. This is his name.

Step away and leave him. I know you understand the trick. Study my eyes.
I LIVE HERE IN THE BASEMENT OF THE GARE DE LYON

he says you'll find me when you come back
and suddenly beneath the ash of neon lights
day was done before daybreak

your eyes stopped me he says
with a flame dying out in his own pupils
and dusk drowned itself suddenly
in the empty glass of his bottle

you speak several languages like me
he says you travel a lot
torture of the motionless traveler
and dawn died suddenly before dawn

I was born in Jerusalem . . . he smiles
I was born in Morocco, Salah, yes, homeless
you'll find me here when you come back
and night was over before nightfall

thirty-two years I've been living in Paris
he says far from my mother's prayers
darkness of failed departures
sun and sand churn in his memory

you come from somewhere else too he says
and the stones moan with absence
the earth stops turning
once yes once I also had a country

I can see in your eyes that you love life
he says . . . only a solitary smile
as a talisman for the soul
there are seven doors left to pass through
the seven doors passed through and the thousand and one trials
perhaps we will be delivered
(if that makes any sense)
from the south of madness the madness of the south

translated by Marilyn Hacker
SO LATE, SO SOON

Don’t assume the car ahead is headed where you want to go. Don’t
mindlessly follow it. Pass the farmstand, graveyard, kennel;

the low-to-the-ground stone-carved clover, your marker. Take

a sharp left. Where light scrolls a sycamore, incising its bark and

leaves, pull over, let yourself be bedazzled until the light scoots.

You’ll see a dirt road with no hedge. Turn right and keep going

East, toward the spit wherein you think your destination lies.

Go farther than you imagined, until the road straightens, narrows.

If you find yourself in a mounting reverie regarding the eloquent
slop of his shoulder,
the sweetly sustained
ardor of his inquiry,

the way he heaps bliss
upon you, then spoons
you to sleep — again,

pull over. Compose
yourself by scribbling
a note to be e-mailed

later. And if, by now,
tired of admiring day
lilies, buttercups,

\textit{you just want to be there,}
check for speed traps
before accelerating.

Soon, on your right,
you'll come to cow
pasture, rolling field,

silo, barns, stacked
hay, and then a sudden
shadow — the woods:

always the woods before
your arrival; a clearing;
the unanticipated bay.
Unmoored, drifting,
I read the urgency I see
in his face as epinephrine-

injected love. I like that
look, and while the moon
wavers, presiding over

my corpus, negotiating
the shrouded terms
of my release, I want

to feel his gravitational,
double-knotted, binding
pull, wrist and waist.
Amit Majmudar

GHAZAL: EXILE

Measured from Eden, shouldn’t every mile of exile
Be thought of as an exile from exile?

I drove through regions known for teas, wines, waters,
But sampled only the varieties of bile in exile.

I tell of distant lands, and in a foreign accent at that.  
A boring homebody makes for a beguiling exile.

Each verse is small enough to pack up on short notice.  
I was forced to atomize my style in exile.

I have become a doctor of identities,  
Refining my photograft and scissorguile in exile.

Flying colorblind, fruit bats in its crow’s nest,  
A ghost ship colonized this isle with exiles.

Here he is, flying home at last, pretzel crumbs on his shirt,  
Pornomag on his lap, bare feet in the aisle: The exile.

Home does not recognize you anymore, Amit,  
And declares you the bastard child of exile.
GHAZAL: DISTANCE OVER WATER

The distance between us is distance over water.
I set out once and have been rowing ever after.

Is this the closest I will come to you, then? Friendship:
The coast no closer though I'm always rowing faster.

I can see the cafes from here, their winecolored umbrellas.
Over the water I can hear pouring wine, Vespas, laughter.

You preside from your balcony over Provence at play.
Mine is one more craft in the tableau of your afternoon.

Sometimes, when you are telling me about him,
My arms ache with the love I haven’t mastered,

And I think of black stones on the beach at Nice
Where footsteps leave no prints and the waves clatter.

I used to live alone on the Isle of Amit; now I live
Alone between my oars. But I have never been happier.
TEXACO FUGUE

The blast crater they were so proud of, Amit, Hasn't so much as dimpled the empire.

The war had less to do with souls than oil. Sheikh Shaitan would not let God control the oil.

They feel strong only when the empire's cameras Record us swearing we will humble the empire.

The devil likes reprocessing temptation: From wine he made the blood, from coal, the oil.

"First they will take our veils, then our faces, Till we come, over time, to resemble the empire."

Uranium, amphorae, water, bones. I hope for one thing when I dig a hole: the oil.

From shards of a world much older than theirs, Children have assembled the empire.

"We hold the city, they hold the streets. In this standoff between shadows, who holds the oil?"

They saw your work on the Dome of the Rock And want you to help them build the empire.

They stole the land, the seeds, the rain, the harvest, But swear to God they never stole the oil.

The tank and the school are twin symbols of empire. Is the cause of our squalor as simple as empire?

When the empire comes to burn your village, Amit, Remember: One of your own sold them the oil.
For example, she says, take the supercontinent Gondwana, pulled twice out of Earth’s mantle only to finally draw and quarter itself after breeding an arkful of hyperthyroidized lizards, flightless cranes, and a species of fish with no jaw.

HUNGER

tuesday’s dinner for five
was noodles with noodles
baked in ketchup

night before that
squirrel dredged like chicken
stuck in the oven

last of the winesap jam
mold scraped from its wax cap

little sister plays
with salt-stuffed tails
says mink stoles

at school heads go down
on the art-room table

the sharp knife makes a pigeon
stretch five ways

red clay clay birds bird shot
morels dogs on scent
wild ginseng night-gigging

we keep some things
to ourselves

hold those names
in our soft mouths
J. D. Nordell

MARCH (BIRD BATHING ON ROOFTOP ABOVE HAIR SALON)

Darklight, and the last flat grays of winter

singing.

The puddle, silver; the sparrow, soot;
the angle between them, a wet hinge, closing.
I saw the owl
with sheer wings
lift from earth
a fox
and take it up
so accustomed
to catching,
making
a dalliance, I saw
next to me, very like
your body, the place
a scythe had
whispered through, with its
scoop of grainy darkness.
FALL

Then I think I’ll keep the window open
a little longer
and the screen in so I can hear
the leaves turning yellow
so it won’t be sudden
the day I sit down
and there’s street — truck — that house,
open so I am reminded, chilled,
how slowly empty space grows.
SOME LINES

A white line and the thought
that alongside it runs,

a thought I’m trying to get past.
I get past.

Then comes a terrible line in a forest.
A line camouflaged,

and when I get down to it,
*twist-ums of wire and scraps of hide caught.*

Back on the street, at the intersection, waiting,
there’s music,

I’m trying not to listen, but that guy’s e string
is about to snap in this heat.
I take a short walk down a long road and come to a small bird made smaller by a flurry of ants.

I come to a chain-link fence, a grassy field harassed by October wind. I come to a panorama.

First, my ears take down a hawk, its red shriek tapering off to silence. Second, my eyes unpin its stretched wings from a ragged cloud. Third to seventh isn’t worth mentioning,

but eighth is: mourners having a picnic. It’s solemn business eating with a plastic spork while wearing funeral attire. Round the table goes the fruit salad, goes the bowl of tears and hotdog buns. The whole scene gives off the stillness of a 14th century Dutch painting until a boom of thunder sends them fleeing the way a car backfiring makes a line of crows erupt from a tree limb. Raindrops stipple the sidewalk as I hurry home to the antidote of your hands. When the time comes to lie down beside you, I’ll begin forgetting what my eyes have recorded: the dead bird, a shrieking hawk, mourners scattering under the flashing sky.
2.

The dead something, a shrieking something, something scattering under the flashing something.
Recorded, our lives run forward
and so I carry this fear of sudden words:
as a girl I’d type telegrams on the keyboard
of our dark computer to let aliens know I was no threat,
here’s where I am, this house, this room, this road:
stop I would type to avoid pressing Enter — that silent machine
let me keep trying while my father mowed the lawn, his young head
marking our place from the sky, my words melting
into song, into dust, all of it I know I’ll never need, I’ll never use up,
my useless words: hello stop today I wore my blue skirt stop imagine:
my telegrams safe with the aliens, no film
to show us ugly as we were, no one
to do a thing. The charity of TV murder clues, standing water
a melted icicle, constellations above a body
marking the spray of blood on a headboard,
this useless river
of solutions, this burr
in my heart, these backspaced calls.
THE HOUSE ON LAUREL HILL LANE

Between the neighbor’s cherry trees
a hat wove through spokes of fruit.
Small birds unshook from the pages of the trees.

She went in, laid out plates and glasses, let old news
foam the room. At midnight the phone would ring
only to click aside. How about a sandwich,

he would say, how about some milk.
These miles of threaded oyster beds,
of just-for-show chimneys. How about
these tinted windows? How when the shore
skirted pails, hollows, then stranded razor clams one by one?

They ate well. Even as the words
shifted on her tongue, as the new pitch
caught hold inside her,
as sand rounded out the garage.

She knew when love unwound her but not how.
Let your hair down over the briar patch,
she read to her daughter from the little golden book,
the two tales sewing each other up.
Solitary, keeping distant
next to each other
with swinging arms.
The father in uniform,
the son with dreadlocks.
The father off to Prussia with knapsack,
the son on the surfboard
beyond the mouth of the rivers.
The father away on trips,
The son an inner emigration.
The father the letters,
the son keeping silent.
Father, who takes things lightly,
son takes to heart.
A mutual fight without rules,
more earnest than the old playground,
longer than lifelong.
The fathers never die
one hears, since ears exist,
and the sons seldom live.
THREE FALCONS

Three falcons, flat over the house in wind, their high cries and their skill.
The thrush in front of my window is invisible in her nest.
I exhale a sharp cloud of tobacco smoke and it blasts back into the room.
Down in the valley a mother takes the path and her tiny son leads the way.
VINETA

Do you remember those days when there was the silence of power?
Do you remember those days when we thought it had to be the silence of power?
We traveled an hour by train through the quietness.
We could have gone five minutes, or two, as the bird flies, we say.
Instead of those seven minutes, we needed an hour for the train,
in which the silence rode beside us.
The silence or its brother; it or its sister.
Those days when the silence of power tried to pull something on us.
Those days when we could not know how long we knew, and even that was only a guess.
This fear for the word, this small worry for knowledge,
that it doesn’t mean anything at all.
No, I don’t write.
No, I don’t sing.
No, I will not be silent.
My street keeps quiet under the boots of silence.
My city keeps quiet under the roar of renewed construction.
The name of the city?
Do you remember in those days when we knew the name, when we knew every name, when the chestnuts spoke with us, cracking open from their own rank growth, when we imitated the explosions with our sharpened mouths, but without success, when we were attractive in our eagerness to be attractive, but couldn’t be, when we could not do any of the things we wanted to do, but did anyway?
Do you remember how it was?
Do you remember, then and now, the same hill, the same catacombs, the trees that have been gone since the last war and reconstruction, and now and forever, do you remember?
I have polished and locked the windows and will not look out of them anymore.
Only brightness shall exist in my house, brightness on the table, and the bed, and the spot where the cat sits.
I have blessed the view with my averted face.
Do you remember how we always looked at things and made predictions, and our saying was: it will be as it is — and how we laughed at ourselves, and the task was, a task seemed to be, somehow it appeared in the faces of the actors and in our faces, but not on their masks, there where we grew weak and diminished, but led a life of desire, no, were led to it by our fate?
Do you remember, and how dull it is, what is written in the statutes of power, in those days when we still read them, do you remember how we wanted to know, how we stood in line, and how now our children go in circles around the city square, silent as they pass stone after stone, and do you remember their question, or have you forgotten it like me?
Do you know, I know it now.
We are sunk.
Every age has its time, and then it sinks, and then sinks faster.
The city is called Vineta, it lies deep in Eastern Europe, the bells clamor at the proper time, but their ringing does not reach far through the silence.

*translated by Maria Hummel and Manfred K. Hummel*
THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God?... It is like a grain of mustard seed: which when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth. But... it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches, so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.

— Mark 4:30-32

+Not-yet-irruptive, unparousial noon:
something’s nested and indeterminable in the roadside mustard shrub

but there’s no fowles of heaven lodged and sheltered there.
A thousand black-pellet seeds

reissue and disperse from its gnawed, cruciferous blooms.

+The tyme is fulfilled, and the kyngdoom

of God schal come nyy?
But the eschatos, the last one, tarries and sojourns
among alabaster jars of spikenard ointment,
among leperskins and myrrh-bearing women.

+Something’s brooded in the lobed-leafed, hair-spiked
rosettes of birdsrape mustard, something
all consonant, unvowelled and augural, among seeds germinal and ready to be crushed.

+Now the psalters crumble and lutes fall away.
The scatomancer, for further mantic droppings, watches and abides.
The latest gnomologia scatter over the ground. 
You who exist, be like 
those who do not exist, says the Secret Gospel. 

+Whereunto shall we liken 
this three-foot golden weedtuft mustard shrub, 
some grizzled 
hatchling’s scratched-out hunger cry inside 
and then inside? 

Say we say it is like the pullulating kingdom — 
over the summer-abandoned schoolyard — 
of the tough bunched green 
fists of unripenable fig. 

+Let the crickets take their gutload. Let the mustard 
shrub unspill its self-profusion, grain by mote-sized grain. 
Let its underleaf warble and unmoving wing-shiver 
speak not without a parable. 
Some things only dissimilitude can tell. 

Now the knives are at my fatlings’ throats. And all things are ready.
ALL SAINTS

The demystification unfurls. Arcana, manifestly occult, are no more at our disposal. The xenotransplantation of the vatic into the vernacular has been halted pending further investigation. All’s serioburlesque & subcelestial. The impasto of the opaque’s oversmudged with oil pastel landscapes & quivered still-lifes. & all the mantic enigmas of the banal: liturgy’s polyglot & thrice-holy hymn, oracle bones in crematoria. The side effects of placebo — gastric spasms, bronchial ache, cicada-whirr deep in the ear — fail, over time, to ameliorate. The Magus holds his chalice under a spigot’s burble & spurt. The Venus fly trap seals shut its three spiked mouths.
"BEHOLD, I AM AGAINST THE PROPHETS," SAITH THE LORD, "WHO WITH SWEET TONGUES SAY, 'THE LORD SAITH'"

As once the six-winged seraph lifted, on the altar’s tongs, a lit coal to sear

the prophet’s unpurged mouth, & Ezekiel chewed a papyrus scroll

written outside & in with oversweetened words of lamentation & song & woe, & slow-of-tongue Moses, holy-inhabited, still

stood before Pharaoh quavering through his *uncircumsized lips* —

so, betongued & vatic, speak of this

spotted rose snapper: through its gills comes the parasitic crustacean

tongue-bug, *c. exigua*, hard-segmented, white-shelled, to fix

its seven pairs of hooks into the mouth’s artery & blood-

suck the fish’s tongue down to a shrivel & supplant that stub from now on

with its own fastened-on & tongue-shaped body
— Let the Spirit of the Lord

speak through thee, and His word
be in thy tongue, be

what tongue thou have,
exoskeletal,

lingual & occupying
(Son of Man, eat that thou findest,

eat this scroll), black
tooth-encaged eyes

peering out toward incoming
scraps of sustenance (mouth enmouthed) through

the snapper’s pink, possessed gape.
Mary Ann Samyn

RISKIER STILL

The tree book says, choose a shape.

(Intuition flares)

My mother wants to know, am I in town?

Infinite Crisis #5.

I’m temper, underneath.
I’m pacing all the way through.

Sketch it out.

Glossy at the edges.

Wow, you said, those are sharp.
I WHISPERED OH INTO HIS EAR.

Lack was the message.

Such is life, I’ve heard.

I found my God good and ready
— want some? —,

my mercy right where I left it.

This is the first in a series:

*Self-portrait as Who Am I to Say?*.

Do you like it? Will you buy it?

How much?

I only made a peep to start.

But the power is in prediction.
Elisabeth Murawski

ON THE HIGH SPEED TRAIN TO VENDOME
I SEE A WOMAN WHO LOOKS LIKE MADAME CEZANNE

I try not to stare.
She leans back and closes her eyes,
brows plucked, no lipstick,
bare throat and lobes

ejewels enough. The train starts,
will glide from Paris to Vendome
in less than an hour, silken
and smooth as a limo. I think

of Chopin frail in coaches.
To Sand in Nohant and back again,
the jolting murderous.
Would he trade centuries?

Meanwhile, my lady sleeps,
and I am struck again
by the resemblance
to Hortense, her hands clasped

neatly in her lap
as Madame posed for Paul
in the conservatory. Fields
of yellow rape stream by,

the horizon jagged
with steeples. Near Vendome,
she jerks awake, rises
to expose the full streak

of leopard-print sweat suit.
Balancing in the aisle,
she's a cypress blown in Aix,
covered from neck to ankle
with splotches of black and gold,
her priceless leopard self
unfinished
but perfectly realized.
PHRYGIAN

My father, kissing me,  
raised my atomic weight.  
Strike my skin and it rings  
like a gong.

Spared his touch,  
a dozen yellow roses  
spread like hair,  
mine on a pillow

before my body froze  
in this posture  
colder than ice —  
his glittering destruction.

My lips make no sign.  
To restore my voice,  
he must take the river  
for his house

and bathe his fault  
until Pactolus's sands  
in shimmering exchange  
turn golden.
I loved one person all my life.

He who let me hold the saw while he hammered, let me hold the hammer while he sawed, his fingers like spigots,

who stormed off, jaw tight with disgust at my incompetence,

lurching into shade-drawn rooms, knocking over the sawhorse on his way, clouds of sawdust for me to sweep,

snoring in a black mood beside the television's soothing voice, awakening an amnesiac, asking if the shutters were cut and sanded, feeling my hands to see if I was lying.

On the Today Show, a man in a straw hat serenades his saw, its bend and whine, accompanies the melody to Oh Suzanna.

I'd like to make a noise like that: carefree, optimistic. Instead I find the birdhouse pattern in the cellar between jars of pennies, haystacks of bent nails: seven squares, a little hole for a door,

dig out the jigsaw, gather wood scraps while whistling, not thinking, This is happiness.
THIS IS A CRIME WATCH NEIGHBORHOOD

It's lawful to walk
through this neighborhood
just like it's
lawful to page through a copy of LifeStyle
in the magazine stand at the Market while
fish stink and
junkies watch the tourists' wallets.
But this is
the neighborhood of subscribers.

And here came one
like a pair of scissors down
her pansy-ribboned path.

Tired of walking's how I replied
to her question how you doing?
Walking's good for you

she said with two meanings.
What hundred block is this
I asked as though something nearby might
be waiting for me.
Sixteen hundred she said.
Same as the century.

Then was around to her door.
Left me alone with
an eye on a phone pole.

Be legal
I heard but it could have been
somebody calling a dog.
NOT LET ACROSS THE HOOD CANAL

Like public funded art
it is a threat

Makes the traffic stop
because
a tender’s opened up the bridge

The surfaced submarine is heading out
that tendon in
the global lurk and shove

At the railing ooohs and ahs

The hills around
are green as stacked green towels

Children roar to life
like tassels yes the wind
will make you okay teary

A Trident sub
is canary black is
black is solitary as a mile marker

We have everywhere to be
and have to wait
INDELIBLE

We know this lump of salt.

It is the body — now at speed,
now at rest. Its ribbons
and creases of flesh, its bruises —
stone rosettes set in alabaster.

And what of time’s strange emblems —
a gash of pink tissue across the chest
a girl’s name in ink, a star, a cross —
each a mythology where the body is cut —

crushed herbs and lines of verse
folded in its wounds
a little tea for clarity
blood for color.

A lover kisses the flesh but forgets the story.

Here is the palm open flat like a map.
Here is the torso — its zodiac of scars.
MIRROR

Everything sticks to this surface.

I keep sloughing particles with reckless abandon.

Hold on to this molecule while I switch shirts.

I left you just a second ago but I’m back and somehow you’ve changed.

We strike a frantic pose, assume an exaggerated shape — it’s getting harder to work with this light.

At this pace a part of us falls apart each instant and we go zooming like particles of light — each instant a new surface to behold.
Adrienne Rich

IF/AS THOUGH

you’d spin out on your pirate platter
chords I’d receive on my crystal set
blues purpling burgundy goblets
Lorca’s piano spuming up champagne flutes
could drop over any night at will
with that bottle of Oregon Pinot to watch Alexander Nevsky
If no curfews no blackouts no
no-fly lists no profiling racial genital mental
If all necessary illicits blew in
like time-release capsules or spores in the mulch
up-rising as morels, creviced and wild-delicious If
Gerard Manley Hopkins were here to make welsh rarebit
reciting The Wreck of the Deutschland to Hart Crane in his high tenor
guessing him captive audience to sprung rhythm as we in lóst lóve
sequences hearing it
       skim uncurfewed, uncowed
pelicans over spindrift beating agnostic wings

for Ed Pavlić

2006
A BURNING KANGAROO

leaping forward escaping out of rock reamed on sky in violet shadow

leaping scorched to the skin toward water (none for miles)

Who did (and can you see this thing not as a dream

a kangaroo and not in profile either

Frontal in flame no halo no aura burning meat in movement

Can you see with me (unverified otherwise

(whoever did this thing

2006
CONTRIBUTORS

BRUCE BEASLEY's latest books are Lord Brain (University of Georgia Press) and The Corpse Flower: New and Selected Poems (University of Washington Press).

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LI QINGZHAO (1084-c. 1151 AD; also transliterated as Li Ch’ing-chao) is widely regarded as China’s greatest woman poet. Exemplifying the School of Delicate Restraint, she excelled at the ci, or “song lyric” form, in which the title conventionally serves to indicate the meter of the poem. KEVIN TSAI, a professor at Indiana University, is working on a translation of Li’s entire corpus.

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Dear David,

Writing to you from Cuenca, Ecuador. I have a small farm in the mountains of Cuenca. I arrived in Cuenca two weeks ago, and I have been enjoying my time here. The weather is perfect, and the natural scenery is breathtaking.

I hope you are doing well. Let me know how you are and if there is anything I can help you with.

Best regards,

Harry

P.S. I have been reflecting on my recent trip to London. It was a great experience. I hope to return soon.