

Adrienne Rich, Collected Early Poems, 1950-1970

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AFTER DARK

I.

You are falling asleep and I sit looking at you  
old tree of life  
old man whose death I wanted  
I can't stir you up now.

Faintly a phonograph needle  
whirs round in the last groove  
eating my heart to dust.  
That terrible record! how it played

down years, wherever I was  
in foreign languages even  
over and over, *I know you better  
than you know yourself I know*

*you better than you know  
yourself I know*  
*you* until, self-maimed,  
I limped off, torn at the roots,

stopped singing a whole year,  
got a new body, new breath,  
got children, croaked for words,  
forgot to listen

or read your *mene tekel* fading on the wall,  
woke up one morning  
and knew myself your daughter.  
Blood is a sacred poison.

Now, unasked, you give ground.  
 We only want to stifle  
 what's stifling us already.  
 Alive now, root to crown, I'd give

—oh,—something—not to know  
 our struggles now are ended.  
 I seem to hold you, cupped  
 in my hands, and disappearing.

When your memory fails—  
 no more to scourge my inconsistencies—  
 the sashcords of the world fly loose.  
 A window crashes

suddenly down. I go to the woodbox  
 and take a stick of kindling  
 to prop the sash again.  
 I grow protective toward the world.

## II.

Now let's away from prison—  
 Underground seizures!  
 I used to huddle in the grave  
 I'd dug for you and bite

my tongue for fear it would babble  
 —Darling—  
 I thought they'd find me there  
 someday, sitting upright, shrunken,

my hair like roots and in my lap  
 a mess of broken pottery—  
 wasted libation—  
 and you embalmed beside me.

No, let's away. Even now  
 there's a walk between doomed elms  
 (whose like we shall not see much longer)  
 and something—grass and water—

an old dream-photograph.  
 I'll sit with you there and tease you  
 for wisdom, if you like,  
 waiting till the blunt barge

bumps along the shore.  
 Poppies burn in the twilight  
 like smudge pots.  
 I think you hardly see me

but—this is the dream now—  
 your fears blow out,  
 off, over the water.  
 At the last, your hand feels steady.

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