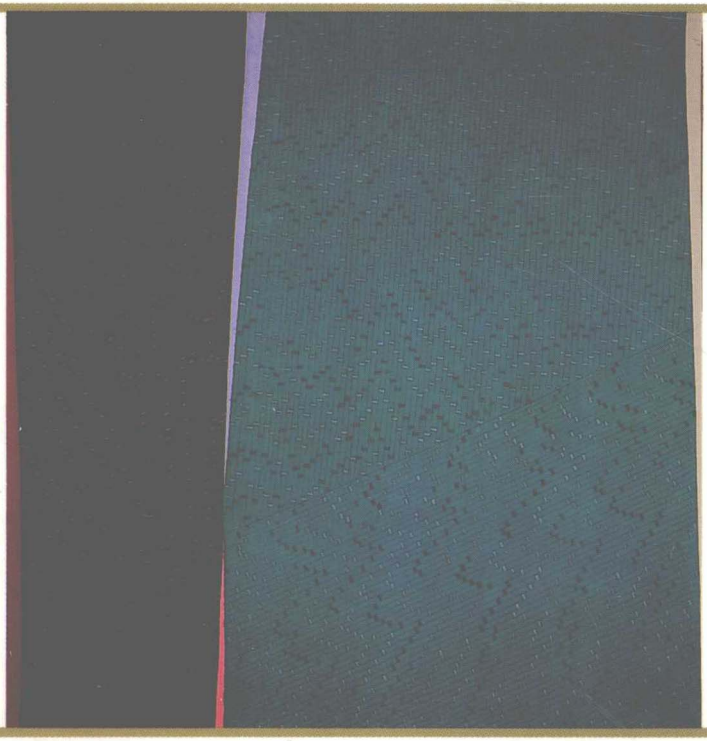
WHAT IS FOUND THERE

NOTEBOOKS ON POETRY AND POLITICS



ADRIENNE RICH

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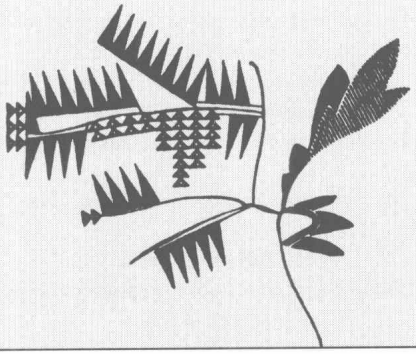


Adrienne Rich

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to quote from the works of Gloria Bolden, Jacqueline Dixon-Bey, and Mary Glover in *INSIGHT: Serving the Women of Florence Crane Women's Facility,* Coldwater, Michigan.

Portions of this book first appeared in *The American Poetry Review, Hungry Mind Review, The Kenyon Review, Parnassus,* and *PMLA*. I was fortunate to be able to present parts of the final draft as the McGill Lecture at the University of Southern California, for the Hellgate Writers' Workshop in Missoula, Montana, for the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and as the 1993 Paul Zweig Lecture for Poets House, New York.

Jacket art: *T-5* by Judith Larzelere (1986). Collection of Kenneth Kronenberg. Photo: Jan Bindas Studios, Boston, Massachusetts.

Printed in the United States of America

The text of this book is composed in Bembo 270
with the display set in Centaur.
Composition and manufacturing by The Haddon Craftsmen, Inc.
Book design by Antonina Krass.
Stenciled book ornament by William Addison Dwiggins.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rich, Adrienne Cecile.
What is found there: notebooks on poetry and politics
/ Adrienne Rich.
p. cm.
ISBN 0–393–03565–4
1. Rich, Adrienne Cecile—Notebooks, sketchbooks, etc.
2. Politics and literature. 3. Poetry. I. Title.
PS3535.I233W45 1993
818'.5403—dc20 93–9912

ISBN 0-393-03565-4

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110
W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Preface

This book is about desire and daily life. I began it because I needed a way of thinking about poetry outside of writing poems; and about the society I was living and writing in, which smelled to me of timidity, docility, demoralization, acceptance of the unacceptable. In the general public disarray of thinking, of feeling, I saw an atrophy of our power to imagine other ways of navigating into our collective future. I was not alone in this perception, but I felt it with a growing intensity, especially as the Cold War, which had occupied so much of the political horizon of my life, began to unravel. It seemed that a historic imaginative opportunity was passing through and that, in the stagnation and dissolution of public life, it might be grasped at weakly, if at all. Some people, indeed, spoke of claiming a "peace dividend," of

turning the billions of Cold War dollars toward curing the social lesions within our borders, even toward creating, at last, a democracy without exceptions, that was really for us all. But the major (in the sense of most visible and audible) conduits of public dialogue in the United States have had little aptitude—or use—for framing such visions, or the policies that might emerge from them.

I knew—had long known—how poetry can break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire. And, in spite of conditions at large, it seemed to me that poetry in the United States had never been more various and rich in its promise and its realized offerings. But I had, more than I wanted to acknowledge, internalized the idea, so common in this country, so strange in most other places, that poetry is powerless, or that it can have nothing to do with the kinds of powers that organize us as a society, as communities within that society, as relationships within communities. If asked, I would have said that I did not accept this idea. Yet it haunted me.

And so this book reflects the time and place in which it has been written: an alleged triumph of corporate capitalism in which our experience—our desire itself—is taken from us, processed and labeled, and sold back to us before we have had a chance to name it for ourselves (what do we really want and fear?) or to dwell in our ambiguities and contradictions. It reflects the undertaking, by one kind of artist, to see and feel her way to an understanding of her art's responsive and responsible relationship to history, to her contemporaries, and to the future. I have never believed that poetry is an escape from history, and I do not think it is more, or less, necessary than food, shelter, health, education, decent working conditions. It is as necessary.

In a different kind of society, the struggle I was experiencing might seem perplexing, either because the repression of the artist took such unmistakable and ruthless forms, or because art was

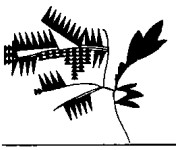
assumed to be as integral to daily life as roads, laws, literacy, clean air, and water. I know that "capitalism" is an unfashionable word. "Democracy," "free enterprise," "market economy" are the banners now floating above our economic system. Still, as a poet, I choose to sieve up old, sunken words, heave them, dripping with silt, turn them over, and bring them into the air of the present. Where every public decision has to be justified in the scales of corporate profits, poetry unsettles these apparently self-evident propositions—not through ideology, but by its very presence and ways of being, its embodiment of states of longing and desire.

This is one poet's book, one citizen's book. But, in fact, poetry is always being created anew, in new places, by unforetold hands and voices. In this, it is like the many movements against demoralizing power. We don't know where either will come from. This is a story without an end.

—Adrienne Rich
February 1993

Contents

What Is Found There



I

Woman and bird

January 1990. I live on a street of mostly older, low-lying little houses in a straggling, villagelike, "unincorporated" neighborhood between two small towns on the California coast. There are a few old palms, apple, guava, quince, plum, lemon, and walnut trees, here and there old roses, climbing a fence or free-standing. One garden boasts an ancient, sprawling prickly pear. An elementary school accounts for most of the traffic, mornings and midafternoons. Pickup trucks and boats on trailers sit for days or weeks or months in front yards; old people and children walk in the road, while the serious traffic moves along the frontage road and the freeway. It's an ordinary enough place, I suppose, yet it feels fragile, as condominiums and automobile plazas multiply up and down the coast.

Around the house I live in there are trees enough—Monterey pines, acacias, a big box elder, fruit trees, two Italian cypresses, an eastern maple—so that mockingbirds, finches, doves, Steller's jays, hummingbirds are drawn to come and feed on plums and ollalieberries, honeysuckle and fuchsia during the warm months of the year. There's almost always a gull or two far overhead. Somebody keeps chickens; a rooster crows at dawn.

Today I returned from an errand, parked the car behind the house. Opening the car door I saw and heard the beating of enormous wings taking off from the deck. At first I thought: a very big gull, or even a raven. Then it alighted on the low roof of the house next door, stretched its long body, and stood in profile to me. It was a Great Blue Heron.

I had never seen one from below or from so near: usually from a car window on a road above a small bay or inlet. I had not seen one many times at all. I was not sure. Poised there on the peak of the roof, it looked immense, fastidious, apparently calm. It turned a little; seemed to gaze as far into the blue air as the curve of the earth would allow; took a slow, ritualistic, provocative step or two. I could see the two wirelike plumes streaming from the back of its head.

I walked quietly into the garden toward the fence between the two houses, speaking to it in a low voice. I told it that I thanked it for having come; that I wanted it to be safe. I moved backward again a little to look at it better. Suddenly it was in air, had flapped out of sight.

It would be easy to call this apparition "dreamlike," but it did not feel so. After some moments I went into the house. I wanted to be sure I could name what I had seen; to stay with what I had seen. I pulled from the bookcase a guide to Pacific Coast ecology. The color plate of the Great Blue Heron confirmed my naming.

Then, as I sat there, my eye began to travel the margins of the book, along the names and habitats of creatures and plants of the 4,000-mile Pacific coastline of North America. It was an idle enough activity at first, the kind that sometimes plays upon other, subterranean activities of the mind, draws thinking and unfiltered feelings into sudden dialogue. Of late, I had been consciously thinking about the decade just beginning, the last of the twentieth century, and the great movements and shudderings of the time; about the country where I am a citizen, and what has been happening in our social fabric, our emotional and sensual life, during that century. Somewhere beneath these conscious speculations lay a vaguer desire: to feel the pull of the future, to possess the inner gift, the unsentimentality, the fortitude, to see into it—if only a little way.

But I found myself pulled by names: Dire Whelk, Dusky Tegula, Fingered Limpet, Hooded Puncturella, Veiled Chiton, Bat Star, By-the-Wind Sailor, Crumb-of-Bread Sponge, Eye Fringed Worm, Sugar Wrack, Frilled Anemone, Bull Kelp, Ghost Shrimp, Sanderling, Walleye Surfperch, Volcano Barnacle, Stiff-footed Sea Cucumber, Leather Star, Innkeeper Worm, Lug Worm. And I felt the names drawing me into a state of piercing awareness, a state I associate with reading and writing poems. These names—by whom given and agreed on?—these names work as poetry works, enlivening a sensuous reality through recognition or through the play of sounds (the short *i*'s of Fingered Limpet, the open vowels of Bull Kelp, Hooded Puncturella, Bat Star); the poising of heterogeneous images (*volcano* and *barnacle, leather* and *star, sugar* and *wrack*) to evoke other worlds of meaning. Sugar Wrack: a foundered ship in the Triangle Trade? Volcano Barnacle: tiny unnoticed undergrowth with explosive potential? Who saw the bird named Sanderling and gave it that caressive, diminutive name? Or

was Sanderling the name of one who saw it? These names work as poetry works in another sense as well: they make something unforgettable. You will remember the pictorial names as you won't the Latin, which, however, is more specific as to genus and species. Human eyes gazed at each of all these forms of life and saw resemblance in difference—the core of metaphor, that which lies close to the core of poetry itself, the only hope for a humane civil life. The eye for likeness in the midst of contrast, the appeal to recognition, the association of thing to thing, spiritual fact with embodied form, begins here. And so begins the suggestion of multiple, many-layered, rather than singular, meanings, wherever we look, in the ordinary world.

I began to think about the names, beginning with the sound and image delivered in the name "Great Blue Heron," as tokens of a time when naming was poetry, when connections between things and living beings, or living things and human beings, were instinctively apprehended. By "a time" I don't mean any one historical or linguistic moment or period. I mean *all* the times when people have summoned language into the activity of plotting connections between, and marking distinctions among, the elements presented to our senses.

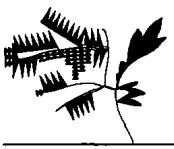
This impulse to enter, with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world, is poetic at its root as surely as it is political at its root. Poetry and politics both have to do with description and with power. And so, of course, does science. We might hope to find the three activities—poetry, science, politics—triangulated, with extraordinary electrical exchanges moving from each to each and through our lives. Instead, over centuries, they have become separated—poetry from politics, poetic naming from scientific naming, an ostensibly "neutral" science from political questions, "rational" science

from lyrical poetry—nowhere more than in the United States over the past fifty years.

The Great Blue Heron is not a symbol. Wandered inadvertently or purposefully inland, maybe drought-driven, to a backyard habitat, it is a bird, *Ardea herodias,* whose form, dimensions, and habits have been described by ornithologists, yet whose intangible ways of being and knowing remain beyond my—or anyone's—reach. If I spoke to it, it was because I needed to acknowledge in words the rarity and signifying power of its appearance, not because I thought it had come to me. The tall, foot-poised creature had a life, a place of its own in the manifold, fragile system that is this coastline; a place of its own in the universe. Its place, and mine, I believe, are equal and interdependent. Neither of us—woman or bird—is a symbol, despite efforts to make us that. But I needed to acknowledge the heron with speech, and by confirming its name. To it I brought the kind of thing my kind of creature does.

A Mohawk Indian friend says she began writing "after a motor trip through the Mohawk Valley, when a Bald Eagle flew in front of her car, sat in a tree, and instructed her to write." Very little in my own heritage has suggested to me that a wild living creature might come to bring me a direct personal message. And I know too that a complex humor underlies my friend's statement (I do not mean it is a joke). I am suspicious—first of all, in myself—of adopted mysticisms, of glib spirituality, above all of white people's tendency to sniff and taste, uninvited, and in most cases to vampirize American Indian, or African, or Asian, or other "exotic" ways of understanding. I made no claim upon the heron as my personal instructor. But our trajectories

crossed at a time when I was ready to begin something new, the nature of which I did not clearly see. And poetry, too, begins in this way: the crossing of trajectories of two (or more) elements that might not otherwise have known simultaneity. When this happens, a piece of the universe is revealed as if for the first time.



II

Voices from the air

On a bleak December night in 1967, I lay awake in a New York City hospital, in pain from a newly operated knee in traction. It was too soon for the next pain-dulling injection; I was in the depression of spirits that follows anesthesia, unable to sleep or to discover in myself any thread that might lead me back to a place I used to recognize as "I." Turning the dial of my bedside radio for music, I came upon a speaking voice, deep, a woman's.

"Who am I?" it asked.

> **Thou art a box of worme-seede, at best, but a salvatory of greene mummey: what's this flesh? a little cruded milke, phantastical puff-paste: our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in: more contemptible: since ours is to preserve**