Daughters, sisters, and mothers: the poetry of Adrienne Rich and the next generation of female American poetics in the poetry of Kristin Stoner

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Daughters, sisters, and mothers: The poetry of Adrienne Rich and the next generation of female American poetics in the poetry of Kristin Stoner

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Kristin Lynn Stoner

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INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich has been a Radcliffe undergraduate, a wife, a mother of three sons, a largely known poet who has received numerous awards, including the National Book Award, a university professor, a social activist, a feminist, and a lesbian. Rich was exposed to poetry almost from birth. Her father had her composing highly formulaic verse at a young age, and reading many of his favorite pre-Raphaelite poets. Rich was exposed to some American poets in college, such as Frost, Elliot, and Dylan Thomas, but what she didn’t get was an alternative stream of American poetics. It wasn’t until she met Denise Levertov, who told her about many of her contemporaries, that Rich began to read those poets who were not yet taught in an academic setting (Thunder Road). Rich’s growing awareness of this alternative poetics can be traced, like many of her life experiences and changes, in her poetry. Of course, this alone does not make Rich a unique writer; any worth-while writer changes and develops as they continue to create. It is Rich’s complete movement through distinct female stages that makes her development unique.

Perhaps it is because Rich has been so many things in her life, and gone through such development as a poet, that she has been referred to as “one of the few contemporary poets who really matters” (Gelpi 649). However, with importance comes interpretation, misinterpretation, and criticism. In her 1986 book The Aesthetic of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich, Claire Keyes claims that Rich’s feminism, while on one hand the source of her might, has made her into an “‘ideologue,’” that she begins to sacrifice the truths of her heart and poetry for what she believes to be a higher purpose (Gelpi 649). Keyes also labels Rich as a “‘man-hater,’” claiming that she “‘sees all men as the enemy’” (Gelpi 649). But
Keyes fails to observe two main aspects of Rich's poetry. First, the distinction between patriarchy and the male authority (including literary authority) within that system that Rich privileges and imitates, especially within the first of her three movements I will be examining here. There are also those male references Rich utilizes in an attempt to reach an unsexed or common language. And, second, as Rich explains:

If we conceive of feminism [as] a more complex way of thinking about, thus more responsibly acting upon, the conditions of human life, we need a self-knowledge which can only develop through a steady, passionate attention to all female experience [...] that the lives of men cannot be understood by burying the lives of women; Rich seems to be asking that we give birth to and create ourselves as one healthy civilization might give birth to another. But that birth is a feminine act, so, in order to create a new civilization, men must feminize themselves (Ostriker 104). Of course this is not what Rich is asking from the beginning. As she develops, Rich not only begins to realize her feminism (those views which work towards the political empowerment of women equally to men) and womanism (the love and appreciation of women's culture), but also her goals regarding that feminism and what she is asking of her readers.

Rich's journey as a poet will be traced here through three stages, as a daughter, as a sister, and as a mother respectively. I chose to label Rich's three stages in this manner not only because of my personal identification with them as a female poet, but because they are reoccurring themes throughout Rich's poetry and hold a great deal of significance in a woman's life as natural stages. Rich's movement through these stages, as well as my own development within the daughter stage, is evidence of the importance of these identities in a woman's life, how they can define not only the way a woman views herself and the way in which others view her, but also the way she thinks and reacts to the world around her. These
stages will be examined through close readings of selected poetry collections as well as an
examination of my own poetry. I chose what I considered to be some of Rich’s strongest and
most influential collections: Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, The Will to Change, Diving
into the Wreck, Dream of a Common Language, An Atlas of a Difficult World, Dark Fields of
the Republic, and Fox.

As a daughter Rich develops her art through the imitation and rejection of other poets,
father and mother figures, patriarchal figures, and, at the same time, reaches for literary and
historical figures as role models. As a sister, Rich seeks connections to women outside the
literary sphere, she addresses historical and ordinary women, identifies with them, and
attempts to understand the common history they share (Ostriker 111). And, finally, Rich, as
a literary mother, sees herself as a guide with the goal of illuminating and expanding her
readers’ sense of possibilities through more strongly didactic texts, an emphasis on the past,
and an examination of the mother/daughter and parent/child relationship.

Each of these stages is just as important as the last. And as these stages are examined
and explored, it should remembered that there are no dividing lines between these
movements, just as a woman does not stop being a daughter when she becomes a sister or
mother. The three movements overlap, move fluidly into each other, evidence of each
existing within the others.
DAUGHTER

Rich's experience as a daughter begins immediately with her birth. Although this is the only way Rich is a literal daughter, without this experience, Rich would not have gone on to become the literary daughter examined in this section. But, before beginning, we should take into account a daughter's obliviousness to her position as a daughter. Even when attempting a rejection of her position, Rich is not aware of the force behind her actions. She does not know from where her frustration towards her parental figures stems. As Rich explains, when she published her first collection of poetry in 1951, there was no women's liberation, no strong feminist movement. Because of this, she had no specific audience or feminist goal in mind when writing her earlier poetry (Thunder Road). As with any daughter, Rich only experienced her emotions and, eventually, reacted to them. She was not initially aware of her position as a daughter as opposed to a son, mother, father, sister, or brother.

When Rich began writing those poems which were ultimately collected in her first book of poetry, A Change of Worlds, was she viewing herself as a daughter of the male American Literary tradition? Probably not. But she certainly realized her imitation of the patriarchal form, even if she was unaware of other ways of writing poetry. Often Rich's earliest poems, the most commonly anthologized of which are "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and "Storm Warnings," are seen as the poetry before Rich allowed herself to openly write as a woman. In many respects this may be true when one considers the extensive self-censorship women poets can impose upon themselves in order to gain acceptance in the male-dominated literary community. But where this kind of interpretation goes wrong is in its simultaneous
repression of its importance in Rich's growth as a poet. It seems to trivialize these early poems as nothing more than the poetry before the feminist poetry that just happened to be a great representation of traditional form and fantastic imagery.

Rich was somewhat of an accepting daughter of the traditions at this point. She had been taught that poetry was to be universal and in a "gender-neutral-realm," and the general definition of this kind of universality was very similar to Wordsworth's, "speaking as a man to men" (Arts 45, 49). Wordsworth was also the man who claimed that politics lead to bitterness and abstractness within poetry (Arts 48). So Rich wrote as her "fathers" (meaning not only those male poets before her, but also those male instructors under whom she had studied) had taught her to write, to men and with little political content, although she seemed to have had an underlying hope to reach a female community as well. But just because Rich was writing universally does not mean she was self-censoring her poetry. It's more complicated than that. Rich was creating as she had learned to create. And without the knowledge of those male poets who came before her, could Rich have effectively broken those rules which she had mastered? Rich began these breaks in form and content in her second collection of poetry, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, published in 1963.

When Rich wrote the title poem for Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, she was already a wife and a mother; no longer was she literally only a daughter. And although there are references to the role of wife and mother within the poem (in fact, the role of a wife is indicated immediately in the title), as a writer Rich was still a daughter. This, too, is evident from the title, as the term "daughter-in-law" carries language regarding both the role of daughter and wife. This title also bears a connection to another female figure, the mother-in-law. Not only is the term a successful medium for comparing the status of women in their
particular generations, but it also holds strong connections to a male figure. So Rich, as a
daughter, is not only striving for liberation from oppressive male figures, literary fathers and
physical as well as figurative husbands, but also from those mothers who are reinforcers of
patriarchy. These are the women who define themselves through their connections with men,
and keep themselves under male control as Rich indicates in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-
Law,” when she writes, “the beak that grips her, she becomes” (The Fact 35). Although most
consider the fear of becoming one’s mother or father cliché, Rich presents in this poem a fear
of falling into a pattern which would cause a woman to create a victim of herself, as that
generation before Rich’s had done; unfortunately, many women of Rich’s generation would
also fall into this model. Unlike the mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law is aware of being
chained to domestic tasks, “[wiping] the teaspoons,” “Banging the coffee-pot into the sink”
(The Fact 35). The daughter-in-law hears the angels telling her to “save herself” (The Fact 35).
But Rich is not only rejecting these mother figures and literary fathers, she is also
searching for literary mothers to replace those literary fathers she is attempting to refuse.
Evidence of this search exists partially in her dedications and imitations.

Rich dedicates her poem “The Roofwalker” to Denise Levertov, who published her
first book The Double Image, in 1946. Levertov was a Jewish woman writing shortly before
and during the same time as Rich. Levertov’s “From the Roof,” seems to be Rich’s model
for this poem. Levertov struggled with the idea that “poet” carried masculine connotations,
as did Rich (McDaniel 8). But this common goal between these two women does not mean
that Rich considered herself on the same plane as Levertov. In Snapshots Rich had not yet
reached the confidence required in seeking sisterhood with other female poets, such as
Levertov. Instead Rich seems to be reaching out to Levertov as a female role model, a literary mother. She is attempting to imitate her as she had previously imitated male poets.

Rich also attempts to make connections to other women poets through the use of their language in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law.” She alludes to Emily Dickinson when she writes, “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun,” and Mary Wollstonecraft with the line, “...is of the utmost consequence” (Snapshots 4, 7). But Rich had few women to choose from, and her quest for role models was only beginning. In later collections, Rich will have to reach beyond women writers to the idea of strong, historical women in general. However, despite the use of Dickinson’s and Wollstonecraft’s language, Rich somewhat undermines herself in her simultaneous use of male-dominated language (that written language created by patriarchy which is highly sexed and draws its meaning from society’s gender labels and stereotypes) and the imitation of male moderns. This use of language is understandable as it is Rich’s only choice of language; however, it still manages to hinder Rich’s liberation and is one of the defining reasons Rich exists as a daughter here.

In the first poem of the collection, “At Majority,” Rich writes, “Grave as Cordelia’s at the last” (Snapshots 1). Not only is this a reference to Shakespeare’s famous rebellious daughter from the play King Lear, and, therefore, a hint about Rich’s viewpoint throughout this collection of poetry as a daughter rebelling against her literary fathers, but it is also a reference to a female literary figure created by another male artist. As a result, we have a simultaneous strength and weakness regarding Rich’s goal of liberation from the male-dominated tradition. Another example is the poem “The Absent-Minded Are Always To Blame” which features “Odysseus / wading half-naked out of the shrubbery” (Snapshots 17). Again we are given a character out of the male-dominated tradition, this time it is a male
figure, not a strong female like Cordelia. This is evidence of the patriarchy embedded deeply within language of the poems collected in Snapshots.

"The Roofwalker," like many of the poems in Snapshots, contains male imagery, "about a naked man" (Snapshots 63). The two most common explanations for Rich writing "man" in place of "woman" here are that "woman" would have been too sexual and that Rich felt compelled to keep the maleness in order to be "universal." Either way the reference serves as evidence of Rich's inability to separate herself and her writing from male influence and language. She may have been aware of this connection but lost on how to sever it.

There was no other language for Rich to use than that which had been created by patriarchy. She would have liked to challenge male/female relationships but the vocabulary did not exist; it was too sexist (McDaniel 7). Even when Rich attempts to move against using patriarchal language she avoids the pronoun "I," not yet confident enough to identify herself as the speaker; instead she uses the second and third persons, "you," "us," "we," "she," and sometimes "he." In "The Knight" Rich refers to "his nerves" and "his rags" (Snapshots 14). Even in the title poem, often referred to as Rich's first poem in which she is not hiding "behind a male mask," she still cannot bring herself to consistently use the first person (Keyes 35). In fact, there are so many different pronouns in this poem that it often becomes confusing. In the first section, the primary pronoun is "you," referring to the mother-in-law. The daughter-in-law is "your daughter." The subject of the poem, the daughter-in-law, is represented as "she" throughout the poem, "she shaves her legs until they gleam," "neither words nor music are her own" (Snapshots 22). There is a first person in the poem, "Two handsome women, gripped in argument, / each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream / across the cut glass and majolica," however this "I" is not the daughter-in-law; it is the speaker of the
poem (Snapshots 22). Rich has separated herself as a speaker estranged from the women in this poem. Claire Keyes, in her essay “The Angels Chiding,” claimed that in this collection, Rich is unable to reconcile what she is (a poet) with who she is (a woman) and she is unable to do so until she finds new terms of power and a new language capable of holding a female energy and creativity (49). This is true of this collection; in fact, Rich’s goal soon becomes the shaping of a sturdy woman’s tradition in American Literature. Eventually, in later collections, Rich will begin to move closer to her goal of creating a female aesthetic and overcome the hindrance of patriarchal language, but in Snapshots it is one of the obstacles that prevents her from reaching her desired liberation. The goal of this collection is liberation from oppressive patriarchal figures, an outside force, not transformation of the self or society, as we will see later as Rich moves through her stages as a sister, and finally as a mother. However, total liberation is not achieved; and evidence of this exists outside Rich’s use of pronouns.

Throughout Snapshots, Rich continues to imitate the great moderns, such as Yeats, Frost and Stevens. The poem “Rural Reflections” stands in four rhyming quatrains and many of those rhymes are masculine (that is they rhyme on a single stressed syllable). Although most of the poetry in Snapshots is not as formal and full of metrical verse as that in A Change of World, including poems such as “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” which follows a strict couplet (aa, bb) rhyme scheme, most of the poems in the collection do hold to a visible pattern. “The Knight” is a poem of three stanzas, eight lines each. And although the poem does not contain end rhyme, it is full of slant rhyme or off-rhyme. There is also what is often called feminine rhyme (words of more than one syllable that end on a light stress) such as lines five and seven of the first stanza, ending with the words “glitter” and “banner” (Snapshots 14).
However, this rhyme does not follow a pattern, and is almost void of any masculine rhymes; it is simply evidence of assonance and consonance within the poem. “Loser” follows a similar pattern; containing three stanzas of six lines each. This poem includes even stronger evidence of metrical verse. There is both masculine and feminine rhyme in this poem and, once again, the couplet rhyme scheme is followed. On the page, both poems look very much like Frost’s poetry. This lasting, reluctant, and almost unknowing, connection to those she is attempting to liberate herself from is why Rich remains a literary daughter throughout Snapshots. However, it would be unfair not to address the fact that evidence of the beginning of Rich’s sister movement begins within her daughter movement.

In the poem “A Primary Ground,” Rich uses an epigraph by Virginia Woolf, a literary mother in that without feminists like Woolf, Rich may not have had the freedom to write her poetry in the first place, or had the opportunity for education. And there is little doubt that Rich is in admiration of Woolf, who had the courage to speak out against patriarchy in an even more rigid society than that of Rich’s generation. However, at the same time, Rich is beginning to see Woolf as a sister, united by their feminist views. But Rich’s sister stage becomes more dominant as she continues to create.
SISTER

Just as Rich sought connections to female literary figures as a daughter seeking a mother in some of her earlier poetry, her poetry of the late sixties and seventies begins to seek connections to women outside the literary sphere. She addresses historical and ordinary women, identifies with them, and attempts to understand the common history they share (Ostriker 111). Although Rich may have begun to show signs of seeking sisterhood in some of her earlier collections, she does not make the complete transformation in content from daughterhood to sisterhood until The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970. In this collection, and that of Diving into the Wreck and Dream of a Common Language, Rich no longer sees other women (women meaning here common women, wives, mothers etc. not strictly women poets) as an extension of the enemy, instead she begins to identify with them (McDaniel 35). In A Will to Change Rich shows women supporting each other in ways they are not supported in traditional heterosexual relationships. Then, in Diving into the Wreck, Rich presents poetry that is systematically womanist while still existing in the sister form. And, finally, in The Dream of a Common Language, Rich shows her belief in the need for a community of women based on shared values and goals (Martin 207).

In Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, Leaflets, and Necessities of Life, Rich’s goal as a daughter was liberation and survival. However, in The Will to Change, Rich moves on from simply attempting to break free from patriarchy and begins to ask questions, seek answers, explore solutions, and discover connections. Rich has become “a woman feeling the fullness of her powers” (The Will 19). The first evidence of this transformation is the collection’s heavy emphasis on dates. Rich began dating her poems by year in 1956:
I did this because I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself; I knew my life was changing, my work was changing, and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long, continuous process (Pettit).

But in *The Will to Change*, Rich gives the dates of the poems an even heavier emphasis by carrying dates into the titles and content of the poetry as well as organizing the poems in chronological order. Rich immediately places her readers in a place in time with the title of the first poem, “November 1968.” Her second poem “Study of History,” also gives evidence of the importance of time. This theme continues throughout the collection with poems like “Letters: March 1969” and “The Blue Ghazals,” which is sectioned according to dates, taking the reader from 9/21/68 through 5/4/69. This emphasis on time shows how Rich has moved beyond her sense of isolation as a daughter among oppressive fathers and self-victimizing women; she is becoming aware of her place as a woman within and connected to history, a woman linked to a community of women. In discovering these sisters and, in some instances, brothers, she seeks answers regarding these siblings, she has become conscious of her previous ignorance regarding them, “I know nothing about it / my ignorance of you amazes me,” “We have never entirely / known what was done to you upstream” (*The Will* 11, 12).

Rich begins to explore these sisters, addressing the inquiries she revealed in her first two poems of the collection, with the third poem, “Planetarium.” In this poem, Rich names a sister, Caroline Herschel, and presents the reader with the dates of Herschel’s birth and death, 1750-1848. Rich also labels Herschel as “sister of William; and others” (*The Will* 13). With “others,” Rich indicates that Herschel is not only her sister in womanhood, but also the sister of any woman who might be reading this poem, as well as any woman who is completely
unaware of the poem and Herschel’s existence. Rich pushes this further in the body of the poem, using the pronoun “us,” reaching out to her readers, asking them to connect not only with Herschel, but with her and the “Galaxies of women” that exist outside the poem (The Will 13). However, by the end of “Planetarium,” Rich slips into first person. The poet and the subject of the poem have become one. Through this ultimate connection of poet and subject, the event that Rich is relating to her readers is no longer a single event in history, separate from the poet and her readers. But at the same time, Rich is not overvaluing the past by allowing the poem to romanticize the time or subject and entirely exist there. She brings her readers back in the last stanza to emphasize the significance of this woman and her history on the present. As David Kalstone explained in his 1971 review of The Will to Change, “Miss Rich’s poems don’t overvalue the past in that way; they are instruments of self-scrutiny and resolve in the present” (Kalstone 221). However, I disagree with Kalstone that such a poem is simply an instrument of “self-scrutiny,” but see it as more of a tool of mass-scrutiny. Rich is not only examining herself, but the community of women that lacks a sisterly connection. However, this community is not limited to women. Rich ultimately seeks a connection among all people. She sees not only sisters but brothers, and she addresses some of these brothers, such as Wallace Stevens and LeRoi Jones, in this collection.

The first brother addressed in the collection is Father Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest on trial for destroying draft files in Maryland in the late 1960s, in the poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” Within the poem Berrigan is compared to Joan of Arc as a political activist and spiritual person, “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 Will 15). Such a comparison demonstrates not only the relationship, and the fact that a connection is even possible between these two people separated by time and sex, but also the larger connection between these two figures, the poet, the reader, and the general community. Time, space, and sex are, or should be, realized as trivial when considering the ideal connection Rich proposes. Rich switches to the pronoun “us” in the fourth section of the poem, “What happens between us / has happened for centuries / we know it from literature / still it happens / sexual jealousy / outflung hand” (The Will 17). However, by the end of the poem, Rich informs her readers of the gap that prevents the ideal connection, the oppressor’s language, “…I can not touch you and this is the oppressor’s language” (The Will 18). This is not a sudden epiphany, however; Rich has informed her readers in the second section of the poem that she needs the oppressor’s language to communicate, and as she strives for an ultimate connection throughout this poem as well as the entire collection, there is a constant feeling of frustration. As Kalstone explains, “It has the urgency of a prisoner’s journal: patient, laconic, eloquent, as if determined thought were set down in stolen moments” (Kalstone 221). Ironically, this is not far from the truth. Rich is a prisoner of her own language. She yearns to write outside the patriarchal language, but there is no other language, at least nothing that will be understood by her readers. So, Rich has done the next best thing, brought the language to her readers’ attention. This has become one of Rich’s temporary solutions. Another solution she explores is the form of poetry.

These poems seem to fight with form, resisting it as further evidence of the patriarchal, oppressive language. In “Planetarium,” Rich scatters words across the page
much like the stars and planets Herschel studied, some of the lines beginning far to the right of the page and many of the lines containing large gaps, causing the reader to slow their reading, study and struggle as Herschel must have, and as Rich struggles herself. Rich also makes use of the little used form of the ghazal, in which poems or sections of poems that could stand on their own are placed next to one another to give them new meaning. Such a form seems to mirror Rich’s purpose, a study of connections and relationships. This attention to and use of form is why I disagree with Albert Gelpi’s claim that Rich is “radical in content rather than formally innovative” (Gelpi 649). But, in spite of such solutions, with each poem, as well as with the collection as a whole, Rich leaves her readers with a sense of hopelessness, defense, and knowledge that these solutions will not suffice indefinitely. And, as the title of the collection suggests, Rich expresses the necessity for change, and even more importantly, possession of the will to change. Rich is unable to accept a public or private life not motivated by the will to change oneself, to change others, and/or to change the world (Ostriker 108).

Rich’s call for change continues in her next collection of poetry, *Diving into the Wreck*. The collection “is one of those books that forces you to decide not just what you think about it, but what you think about yourself. It is a book that takes risks, and it forces the reader to take them also” (Atwood 238). *Diving into the Wreck* is often considered to be Rich’s first systematically feminist collection. And it is true that before 1970, Rich did not label herself as a feminist, “And I remember thinking I didn’t want to be labeled as a feminist. Feminists were these funny creatures like Susan B. Anthony, you know. She was a laughingstock when I was growing up” (Rich, “I happen”). But just because Rich resisted
the label, does not mean that her writing did not carry a feminist purpose. If one defines feminism as the liberation of women, the rejection of differences based on sex, the asking of questions and searching for answers, and/or working for the political empowerment of women equally to men, then Rich's poetry was systematically feminist long before 1971. In fact, it was with *Snapshots of a Daughter in Law*, poems dated as early as 1954, that Rich begins her resistance and liberation. However, if we were to say that *Diving into the Wreck* is Rich's first systematically womanist collection, we might be more accurate. I define womanist here as the love of other women, sexually or non-sexually, appreciation and preference of women's culture, emotional flexibility and strength (Kolman 11). But how does this change her poetry? If Rich is still seeking connections with other women, still searching for sisterhood, how can this collection be considered so different from the rest?

The first way in which *Diving into the Wreck* is distinct from Rich's other collections, and more specifically *The Will to Change*, is her disconnection with men. In *The Will to Change* Rich dedicated poems to Wallace Stevens and Arnold Rich, among others, and included males within her poetry by name, such as Freud. Rich also used male imagery and pronouns, "His soles grind rocksalt / from roads of the resistance" (*The Will* 29). In fact, for a period after *Snapshots*, Rich used male figures sympathetically (Ostriker 117). But there is no such sympathy or connection in *Diving into the Wreck*. When Rich mentions men in this collection it is to identify them as the opposition or the hostile "they." The men of this collection do not have a common siblinghood with Rich; instead they are depicted as emotionally threatened by women and sometimes brutal, such as the policeman who identifies with a rapist in "Rape." However, Rich, or the speaker of the poetry, is not
helpless to her enemies; Rich has made a move beyond simply writing as a woman. In
“Diving into the Wreck” Rich defines herself as an androgyne, at once both male and female,
“I am she: I am he,” (Diving 24). Rich has made a move with this collection; to use her own
analogy, she dove into the wreck, threw herself into the deepest questions, the farthest past,
to expose the problems of patriarchy to her readers. Evidence of this new action is even
within the titles of the poems, which are full of verbs, “Diving into the Wreck,” “Trying to
Talk with a Man,” “When We Dead Awaken,” “Waking in the Dark,” “Living in a Cave,” and
“Burning Oneself In,” to name a few. The poems in The Will to Change contained more
passive titles, often including dates.

The second way in which Diving represents a transformation in Rich’s poetry is its
use of anger. The second section of the collection is entitled “Phenomenology of Anger,”
suggesting that this is not an explosion of anger or a rant that the reader is about to
experience, but anger used and explored as something scientific and extraordinary. And as
Wendy Martin claims in her review “Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s
Poetry in America,” it is through this feminist analysis of anger that Rich manages to avoid
the confusing effects of internalized rage, which paralyzed and eventually destroyed poets
like Plath (466). Rich is aware of the effects of anger, as she explains in her poem “The
Phenomenology of Anger, “which was to feed & which is strangling her,” “to kill is to cut
off from pain / but the killer goes on hurting,” (Diving 27, 28). Yet, at the same time and
within the same poem, Rich is able to clearly express her anger, “I hate you. / I hate the mask
you wear, your eyes,” (Diving 29). This expression and examination of anger further severs
Rich’s previous connection with men, “The only real love I have ever felt / was for children
and other women," and separates this collection of poetry from those which preceded it as strongly womanist (Diving 30).

The final evidence, or at least the last that will be mentioned here, of Diving as distinct from The Will to Change, yet still within the same movement, is Rich's strong and repetitive use of sisterhood. In the previous collection Rich reached out for connections with other literary and common women, but rarely did she use the word "sister" to describe this connection. Perhaps the only exception is in the epigraph to "Planetarium," when she identifies Caroline Herschel as the sister of William and "others." However, this only implies the sisterhood; it is not as obvious as those connections made in Diving. Rich continues to use pronouns as a means of expressing her bond with other women, but she begins to go beyond this in "The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen As One," with the first line and its repetition later in the poem, "She is the one you call sister" (Diving 14). Rich continues to label other women as her sisters throughout the collection, telling her readers that, "we are sisters," (Diving 15). Then, in "For a Sister," Rich identifies Natalya Gorbanevskaya, a Soviet political activist specifically as a sister. This poem is not unlike "Planetarium" as Rich is identifying with a specific woman from a different time, place, and/or profession, however, the fact that Rich has gone so far as to label this woman as her sister in the title, where as in "Planetarium" it was only implied in the epigraph, shows Rich's strong womanist movement within her broader movement as a sister within her poetry. This labeling is definitely a step beyond the insinuations that exist in The Will to Change, but it is not the only way Rich expresses her sisterhood.

In "After Twenty Years" Rich writes, "It is strange to be so many women" (Diving 13). With this statement, Rich has gone beyond sisterhood, and becomes one with other
women, not only are they equal, they are the same. Rich touches on this same idea in “Planetarium” when she switches pronouns in the last stanza; however it is not as obvious as it is here. Just as Rich as severed her connection with men and the patriarchy they represent within this collection, she has strengthened her connection with women. She moves beyond time, space and language, and finds her sisters, experiences their unity. She will soon call upon her women readers to do the same.

In Dream of a Common Language Rich can still be considered within her sister movement because the core of the book is the visionary study of loving woman to woman relationships. The first section of the collection, “Power,” is concerned with the outstanding achievements of individual women, the second section, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” is a lyrical testimony of female emotion, eroticism, and the shared lives of women. Then, in the final section, “Not Somewhere Else, But Here,” Rich examines the effects of the past on the present, analyzing history to discover its implications on contemporary women’s lives (Martin 207). The collection examines the relationships of mothers and daughters, literal and metaphorical sisters, lovers, and ancestresses. Rich sees all women as united by a common love and/or memory of a mother’s body (Ostriker 120). Although this book is not considered here to be within the mother movement of Rich’s poetry because Rich herself has not taken on the role of the mother, she is still seeking women as her peers, and calling on others to join in this unity as one of these sisters. However, we must also take note of the overlap of these two movements, just as with the overlap of the daughter and sister movements mentioned earlier. The sisterly connection between women that existed in Diving into the Wreck and The Will to Change still strongly exists in this collection. Rich dedicates poems to women such as Michelle Cliff (a Jamaican-born poetry and prose writer), Marie Curie,
Elvira Shateyer (leader of a woman’s climbing team who died on Lenin Peak), Audre Lorde, and Paula Becker and Clara Westhoff (two artists of the early twentieth century), again crossing time and space to establish the connections she has with these women. And, maintaining what she began in *Diving*, Rich continues to mention sisterhood, such as in the poem “Sibling Mysteries.” However, Rich moves beyond these connections and introduces the physical connection between women, sexually and maternally.

The sexual connection shared by women is most strongly indicated in “Twenty-one Love Poems,” in which Rich tells of the romantic relations between two women. Rich also constantly calls attention to the bodies of these two women, their similarities, and, therefore, their physical union, whereas Rich’s previous poetry seems to connect women based on their similar female experience and/or spirituality. “Your small hands, precisely equal to my own- / only the thumb is larger, longer – in these hands.” “…that creatures must find each other for bodily comfort / that voices of the psyche drive through the flesh” (*Dream 27-30*).

In the third section of the book, “Not Somewhere Else, But Here,” Rich begins to give her readers strong evidence of the physical maternal bond. One of the poems that most strongly communicates this bond is “Sibling Mysteries.” In the second section of this poem Rich begins, “Remind me how we loved our mother’s body,” reaching out to her siblings, and more specifically her literal sister, under the common experience of the mother (*Dream 48*). This connection with a mother figure is something all women (and men) can relate to, it is a common experience. As Rich explains in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, a girl’s first feelings of warmth and tenderness come from her mother (218). But Rich also touches on the common experience of being separated from the mother emotionally due to the demand for the transfer of a woman’s emotions onto a male,
and how eventually women are made taboo to women, "and how we thought she loved / the
strange male body first" "of how her woman’s flesh was made taboo to us" *(Dream 48-49).* Within the poem there are repeated references to the female body and its connection to the
spirituality and experience of all women, all sisters.

However, the mention of a mother does not necessarily place Rich back to her
daughter position as a writer, just as it does not completely place her in her mother stage of
poetry because Rich is not writing as a literary daughter here, she is prioritizing sisterhood
and the bond she shares with women as physically coming from a woman. But, again, the
overlap in movements and the continual journey of the writer should be acknowledged.
MOTHER

In her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Rich claims that "The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities" (246). This is exactly what Rich sets out to do as she enters into her poetic stage as a literary mother. Rich’s achievement of this goal and development as a literary mother can be traced through more strongly didactic texts, an emphasis on the past, and an examination of the mother/daughter and parent/child relationship. As a literary mother, Rich begins to expose her readers to examples, happenings, histories, and lessons. Although the beginning of this movement exists in some of her earlier work, it is in *An Atlas of a Difficult World* (1991) that we can begin to see a more obvious transformation.

In *An Atlas of a Difficult World*, Rich begins this didactic quality immediately with the first poem of the collection, labeled for its first line "A dark woman, head bent, listening for something." The poem begins by exposing the use of pesticides and the exploitation of field workers, then moves on to other societal victims, such as a woman beaten and murdered by her husband.

In the fifth poem of the first section of this collection, Rich exposes the horrors of a murder committed on May 13, 1988, when Stephen Roy Carr shot and killed Rebecca Wight while she was camping with her lover on the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania, simply because she was a lesbian. Her lover was shot five times and dragged herself to the road for help. It is through stories like these that Rich is teaching her readers, making them more intimately aware of the difficult world, as the title of the collection suggests. On the other
hand, it is true that Rich has long possessed the urge to expose problems such as the
disempowerment of women and the need for unity to her readers in her earlier work. But, the
focus has shifted for Rich from language and/or the relationship of women to women and
women to men, and broadened to more diverse social ills. Also, Rich now presents a map of
these difficulties through a strong use of first person narration, taking on a variety of
 personas as well as using her individual voice. This is an important element for any text that
attempts to be strongly didactic. Just as a teacher or parent speaks directly to a student or
child, the speaker of many of these poems is speaking directly to the reader. Rich has, in a
sense, become the mother and her readers her children.

In the last section of the collection’s first poem, Rich switches to a first person point
of view, “If you had known me once, you’d still know me / now though in a different / light
and life” (Atlas 4). Rich will continue to use this point of view and refer to the past through
this stance as her mother stage develops, emphasizing her wisdom of the past, thus gaining a
new form of credibility beyond that of being a woman and, therefore, adding to her
didacticism. While it is true that Rich has consistently valued time in her poetry, (she has
been dating each poem for the majority of her career) her emphasis was always more
immediate, such as in the poem “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” (1968) regarding
Fr. Daniel Berrigan who’s actions were controversial simultaneously with Rich writing the
poem. When she did focus on the past, it was detached or for the purpose of reaching a
connection between what had been previously disconnected, usually making reference to an
 event or individual who existed long before her, such as Caroline Herschel who lived in the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But, as a literary mother, Rich refers to the past of her
lifetime. Rich’s valuing of the past becomes so entwined into her poetry that she seems to
have a hard time realizing where the past ends and the present begins (Of Woman 86).

Perhaps the reason for this change is, as Rich explained herself, that one cannot write a poem directly after an event; there is a distance required as well as further experience before a poem can come, and with time and experience comes that distance (Dan). In addition to this distance gained through experience, there is also a certain amount of credibility achieved to expose her readers to the injustices of the difficult world in which they live. Furthermore, Rich’s presence in the past and the experiences she relates allow readers to better accept her messages. When she first asks, “have I been sitting here so long” in the third section of the first poem, the suggestion of age gives credibility to her following statements, “nothing comes without labor,” and “not all labor / ends in sweetness” (Atlas 10).

Rich’s emphasis on the past of her lifetime is a constant throughout An Atlas of a Difficult World, continues into Dark Fields of the Republic, and then to her most recent collection, Fox. Histories like that of the murder committed by Stephen Roy Carr is obviously a history meant to expose Rich’s readers to the hate acts against lesbians; however it is a history from only three years prior to the publication of the collection. Therefore, the story is not truly a history for Rich because as she was writing the poem the murder was a current event, making the example less distinct from that of earlier collections when Rich would value the time of a poem’s formulation and composition or the time of a historical individual. Within this mother movement, Rich’s strongest and most important references to history are more personal and distant in time. (By personal here I do not mean only those experiences that belong to Rich as an individual, but also those experiences that Rich relates by taking on a persona and those happenings during her lifetime that have intrigued her as an individual, therefore, compelling her explore them and educate her readers regarding them.)
In “Eastern War Time,” from the collection *An Atlas of a Difficult World*, Rich takes her readers back to 1943 and relates what it would have been like to experience WWII as a young girl. At this time Rich would have been a fourteen-year-old Jewish American girl. Although Rich uses a third person point of view, the experiences related in the poem are very personal to Rich’s life and past. Later in the poem, Rich switches from a girl to a woman of sixty, again showing readers herself through a third person point of view, “A woman of sixty driving / the great grades sea-level to high desert / a century slipping from her shoulders” (*Atlas* 41). Rich’s mention of the century that slips from this woman’s shoulders, again accentuates the importance of the past and the way in which it is carried with her and her reader(s). Rich even goes so far as to let history speak for itself, “Memory speaks: / you cannot live on me alone / you cannot live without me […] I can’t be still I’m here” (*Atlas* 43). However, as above mentioned, this very personal history is not the only way Rich values the past, she also uses personas to educate her readers.

In *Dark Fields of the Republic*, Rich includes a section devoted entirely to the representation of different voices or personas. This section, “Six Narratives,” carries a strong emphasis on the telling of stories. Speakers tell us that they “fled that story,” or use second person to speak to the reader, telling him/her that “You were telling a story about women,” or “telling a story about love” (*Dark* 49-51). Each of the six poems begins with the telling of a story, often involving love, war or both. This repetition of telling a story, especially paired with the repetition of love and war, stresses the past, and, more specifically, Rich’s individual past despite those voices Rich uses to speak in these poems. When we examine Rich’s individual past, it is easily understandable why she would emphasize the ideas of love and war and their importance to memory. A great deal of Rich’s life has been shaped by war.
First with the second world war, as seen in the above mentioned poem, “Eastern War Time,” then the Viet Nam War with its protests and parallel with the women’s and civil rights movements. Rich’s experiences with love are also incredibly important to her work, as a woman who was married and became a mother before realizing and accepting her love for women.

Rich further highlights the past through her use of dates. The poem “Food Packages: 1947,” immediately presents readers with a setting by having a specific date in the title. Rich has done this before, but the dates that label those poems have a direct relationship to when Rich was writing them, and they are more immediate. There is a gap of forty-six years between the date of Rich’s composition of “Food Packages: 1947” and the events which are related through the poem. Other poems of this collection also carry titles that suggest importance of the past and/or the past as a base of comparison to the present, “What Kind of Times are These,” “In Those Years,” “And Now,” and “To the Days” are just a few. Within these poems are lessons to be learned from their speakers. Rich often speaks directly to her readers to present these lessons, even if she is doing so through a persona. However, Rich manages this without preaching; she is not interested in telling people what they should be doing, instead Rich views herself as a radio, transmitting messages and observations (Dan). On the surface this may seem somewhat different than the guidance a literal mother would give her children, we might think it strange if a mother did not give her child orders at some point at least to “come here” or “drink your milk.” However, after a child is shown and told (often through example and analogy) so many times, they must then begin to make decisions on their own. Rich is aware of this as a literary and literal mother. She has given her readers lessons and histories as learning materials, she has given them her own experiences
as well as those of others, and she has exposed them to the awfulness of depression, rape, murder, and other horrific dangers of patriarchy. The absence of obvious, telling morals is not only necessary for the art, but also for the readers, who would soon become bored with constant morals exposing their own inadequacies.

This ability to speak directly to the reader and present him/her with knowledge only escalates until we reach Rich’s most recent collection of poetry, Fox. Throughout this collection Rich presents herself as a guide: “I become the guide,” “Not simple is it to do / a guide’s work” (Fox 44-47). However, as a guide, she has not cut herself off from her own lessons and the experience of continuing to learn “I lead and I follow” (Fox 41). By presenting herself in this way, Rich is flexing her muscles, defining her place and relationship with her readers. She even goes so far as to address her readers in the poem “Noctilucent Clouds” with, “Dear Stranger” (Fox 37). This is a direct reference to Gertrude Stein’s answer when asked who she wrote for, “I write for myself and strangers.” Rich mirrored this answer in a 1998 interview with Eavan Boland (Dan). Addressing the reader, even as “Stranger,” shows Rich’s confidence and determination to get her readers’ attention so that they might receive her messages, “but isn’t this what it means to live- / pushing further the conditions in which we breathe?” (Fox 11). However, as the poem “Noctilucent Clouds” continues, it becomes apparent that Rich is not writing only to strangers in general, but other poets, giving them lessons such as, “Every art leans on some other” (Fox 38). This is a motherly move for Rich; she feels compelled to guide other poets, perhaps giving them the guidance she so craved as a young writer, much like a mother wishes a better life for her children.
In one of the last poems of the collection, “Four Short Poems,” Rich addresses poets once more, “and this, beloved poets / is where our hearts, livers and lights still / dwell unbeknownst and vital” (Fox 57). Speaking directly to poet readers shows Rich’s confidence in her place as a teacher to other poets. In this same poem, she feels comfortable enough to respond directly to another poet, Robin Blaser, a male poet four years Rich’s senior, “I’d compel you as I / have been compelled by you” (Fox 54). Whereas Rich had previously seen herself below or under other writers as a daughter, only aspiring to imitate their work, and as a sister saw herself connected to other women in general through art and/or sex, now, as a literary mother she sees herself as capable of inspiring those same artists who have inspired her.

Just as Rich presents herself as a teacher and a student simultaneously, she explains in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), “We are, none of us, ‘either’ mothers or daughters; to our amazement, confusion, and greater complexity, we are both” (253). Rich holds true to this statement as she explores the mother/daughter and parent/child relationship. As Rich moves through this stage of her poetry, her exploration of these connections and references to herself as a mother figure, steadily increase. In “The Dream-Site,” she writes, “What would it cry if the child swept under, the mother / on the beach then, in her black bathing suit, walking straight / out,” (Atlas 17). In the fourth section of “Eastern War Time,” Rich presents the weight of a parent’s responsibility, “What the grown-ups can’t speak of would you push / onto children?” (Atlas 38). By 1995 and the collection Dark Fields of the Republic, the emphasis on these relationships only increases, “…she was our mother, but / she was born one of them?” “‘not good dawn’ my Jewish
grandmother called it)" "She could be / myself at nineteen" (*Dark* 7, 54, 62). However, it is Rich’s most recent collection that carries the strongest emphasis on these relationships as well as her place as a mother. "into the birth-yell of the yet-to-be human child / pushed out of female the yet-to-be woman," "her child inside gazing / at a screen / and she a reader once now a woman foreseeing" (*Fox* 25-32). Such references to this relationship are characteristic of Rich’s view of herself as a literary mother largely because of their parallel with her references to herself as a guide as well as her strong confidence, presentation of answers and references to her past poems, which all embody a mother’s role as opposed to that of a daughter or child. Rich presents her past poetry to her readers as lessons, "How I’ve hated speaking ‘as a woman... You too / sexed as you are hating / this whole thing you keep on it remaking" (*Fox* 52). Here Rich seems to be following her own advice that we need to tell girls about what they will face as a woman just as we must tell non-whites what they will face because of their race (*Of Woman* 248). However, the poem on the facing page states, “I lead / and I follow,” which seems to detract some of Rich’s authority. She does this even more so when she writes, “I have lost our way the fault is mine... I should have been stronger held us / together” (*Fox* 44). But Rich is not trying to contradict herself, or to reduce her credibility, she is only stressing that she is not only a mother or daughter, she is both. Rich is still learning, even if she has moved beyond the rebellion against her literary fathers, and expanded on the call for a connection among all women. And Rich is only asking that her readers do the same, continue to learn and create, to give birth to themselves so that a new society can be born, a society that does not ignore women, women’s history, women’s issues, and the significance of matriarchal lines.
KNOWING YOUR PLACE: THE POETRY OF KRISTIN STONER

In her poetry, Rich observes a world where women feel dominated, embattled, tyrannized, and victimized, where women internalize this cultural bias as self-hatred or depression (Martin 231). My own poetry is the individualized experience of this world. It offers the testimony of one who lives within those restrictions and through those emotions. It is a young woman becoming aware of her limitations and pushing against them. Like Rich, my poetry does not reject men, only destructive masculinity, especially when presented through and reinforced by women. In fact, much of my poetry involves males. I believe they are important to this collection because they demonstrate the effects of my female relationships on my interactions with men.

More specifically, this collection of poetry deals with female relationships in rural Iowa. It suggests that those traditional, patriarchal ideals that still exist in the rural Midwest are most strongly reinforced by women, those women who are failing to expand the younger generation’s sense of actual possibilities. Therefore, place plays a vital role in this collection, just as vital of a role as it plays in Rich’s poetry as she writes through her place as a daughter, sister, and mother. Her place as a woman, a Jew, and a lesbian are also imperative to the development of her poetry, just as my place as a woman, a daughter, and a Midwesterner are crucial to my poetry. It is place, I believe, that has created the women of these poems, including myself. The Midwest in general has been known in the past for its delay, following the rest of the world’s trends and ideas a few years behind schedule. It is only natural that rural Iowa women might be less knowledgeable, if not unaware of, things like the women’s movement. In fact, they often fear such strong change. It is place (geographically, sexually,
and socio-economically) that has shaped me as well as all those who exist within this poetry and our relationships with each other.
The Will To Change

"We have never entirely known what was done to you upstream."
Adrienne Rich – The Will to Change

1968
In New York, Adrienne thinks of Caroline Herschel, feels the compulsion to hit the hard keys of a type writer. In Iowa, my grandmother tells my mother no, they don’t have the money to send her to beauty school twenty miles away; tells her she’ll have to take back the pink starter kit she bought at career day. My mother cries for ten minutes on the back steps, before wiping tears with her shirt because supper’s almost ready and her little sister wants to show her the new blue skirt their mom bought her at the store, earlier, before my mother came home carrying her kit.

1969
My mother slides closed the zipper of her chiffon prom dress, touches yellow curls piled high. Downstairs a boy waits with the first carnation he saw. Alone, she leans into the mirror, touches her slim, Swedish nose, the corners of her blue eyes, like she imagines he might want to touch her later, she blinks back the burn of repulsion, wonders, “What will they do if I just don’t come down?” No one tells her that this moment is political. No one shows her – she doesn’t know – the boy waiting on the broken springs of the couch in the living room, used the oppressor’s language to ask her.

1970
My mother sits at her cold, metal desk, typing
for the boss the other secretaries call Tricky Dicky,
and watches the present flashing in a rearview mirror,
takes short hand like they taught her
at the cheap secretarial seminar, unaware
of the endless wheel of conversation
to which she is bound, the seminar
didn't say anything about shooting
the same scene over and over,
she wasn't given any books. On her break
she eats egg salad and hopes for love,
children, a home with lots of windows,
Cigarettes in a Kitchen

We gather around the fumes
as if they were God, filling all
of our lungs, even those of us
who don’t like cigarettes. Five

women inhaling it like swirling
clouds of conversation, gossip
and slang in a kitchen turning yellow
and gray. Gray as my grandmother’s
course hair growing thick just above
her lip that disappears when she kisses
the end of her Ultra Light Blue. She
forces smoke, like understanding,

away as she speaks. Swift, Swede
eyes follow it up, and mine, slow
and brown, follow it down again
and into my nose where it’s held

by tiny hairs against my will, captured
somewhere behind my eyes, between
my temples, making my head pulse
with every judging word. And I think

maybe the smoke, the hard, suffocating
smell, the haze it creates, is why
I can’t understand my mother’s Midwest
expressions, Gamey, taters, roastin’ ears,

my aunt and grandmother’s anger
at the stupidity of that damned Clinton,
men, and the hell bent woman next door.
This cloudy kitchen is why I don’t recognize

the names, Johnson, Swedelund, Larson,
my younger cousin repeats in whispers.
And maybe it is this confusion that makes
my eyes burn with the brightness

of their creamy hair, their crystal eyes,
haloed in the smog that dulls
me, makes me want to shut
my eyes, cover my ears.
The Attack

During Christmas dinner
we found a lump in the untouched pit
of darkness behind my grandmother's earlobe,
one of the grandchildren pointed it out
with one accusing finger,
and Grandma touched it, saying
it was only a cist to be removed
after the holidays, but we knew better
than to believe her raspy voice,
full of thick liquid.

We realized upon close examination
it was, in fact, a black head, neglected,
grown to the size of a pea
behind her sagging ear, before
her graying, horse-like hair.

Her two daughters beamed
at the idea of destroying
this tiny section of their mother
and half ran to retrieve
warm rags to loosen it up.

They hovered over her,
like they hovered
over their own children, closer
to her than I had ever seen them,
and attacked the pebble-sized part of the woman
who had taught them as girls
*The woman always has to be the giver,*

with fingernails, tweezers, and pins
dipped in alcohol, like she had taught
them to do on their own bodies,
scraping and picking away
anything foreign or new
with the promise of age,

until it was red, bleeding,
and nearly flat like the rest
of her slack skin.
My grandmother's face
was unmoving, her eyes dry,
as her offspring tore
at the soft flesh hidden
by cartilage and skin. I tried
to look away from the solid puss
that emerged onto tissues,
paper towels printed with holly,
and the long ruthless fingernails
of women attacking
woman, the woman
that birthed them, showed
them what it felt like to be
small, insignificant, hated
and loved at the same time,
the woman that demonstrated
how to raise and how not to raise
their own children.
The Other Woman

I knew like the smallest fruit fly knows
I was being studied, an organism under microscope,
a lesson on what she needed to win this man in love.

I remember how she watched me, stolen looks
when she thought I was watching TV
or tucking my shirt into my pants, her brown eyes
turned sideways to compare our waist lines,
the curve of our breasts, wanting to see me natural,
in my usual habitat, taking notes on what I ate,
my grooming rituals, how my hands moved when I talked.

When I entered a room she examined my hair,
my checks through her magnifying lens, wondered
how my neck would smell when he was close to me,
what my skin felt like under cotton sheets,
what his skin felt like under cotton sheets,
how these two beings came together,
what it would take to break them apart,
trying to steady her hand so she might pull
my wings, sever them from my buzzing body.
Seeing

You were always olive green and gold,
in the comfort of the candle light you craved
more than sun, created with wood matches,
vanilla-scented wax and tiny class containers,
to bathe in the color of dry corn, the color
of your childhood, to try and remember its smell.

You were always olive green and gold,
in the small windows of your eyes,
where colors moved together, swirled
like mixed paint, darkened to the color
of old walnuts when you felt trapped
by the woman you chose, the girl you created.

You were always olive green and gold,
in a pickle-colored down coat I wanted to crawl inside,
sleep there, let you carry me like mother had done,
hear your thoughts before I started to assume them,
listen for them behind whiskey, try to see them
past hanging pipe smoke.

You were always olive green and gold,
in autumn you piled walnut leaves high,
told me to get in them, toss them up
in heavy colors to the gray sky, watch
them come down, until I could not help
but remember the deep rustling of your voice,
the warmth of decay on my back.

You were always olive green and gold,
at dusk with a gin and tonic, a lime between your fingers,
the setting sun gilded your red hair until you became God
or something like God, Lord over our back yard
because it was all I knew, and what could be above you?

You were always olive green and gold,
standing at the corner of the kitchen counter,
your arms and legs crossed in front of you,
the light above the sink cast over your left shoulder
and onto the beard you rub before you tell me,
Your mother is still a beautiful woman.

You were always olive green and gold,
in tall grasses under a low sky, a whistle in your mouth,
your dog moved back and forth in front of you
somewhere under the gold sea, you listened for her bell,
chirped once, threw your arm out to the right,
the ring of the dog moved right, and before continuing
you called over your shoulder, above moving grass and wind,

*See that, I can’t see her, but she can see me.*
My Mother's Bunion

I tell her I'm hot,
and she tells me she's freezing,
that her nose is cold,
she can't feel her toes,
especially the big one on the left
where her bunion used to be,
the one she had removed
three years ago now,
the one that made her decide to live
with the one on the right

because it was all too painful
to be opened up,
to have bone sawed away
in little pieces of bloody white,
something that had grown
so gradually, so steadily
over the years, becoming
part of her, inside, under
the skin, so she wasn't sure
how to resent it when it beat with soreness.

Then, in the sharp hurting
of severance, she hobbled to the kitchen
against strict orders,
and in her soft voice,
so doubting of everything,
confidence in nothing, no one,
instructed me on how to stir
canned soup, afraid
I was taking care of her,
and told me there was no way
she was having the other one done.
Dusk in Iowa

He was opening the east side of the gate when Pauline swept out into the lawn through the slap of screen door to take in the last load of rising white sheets under pink, October sky.

He walked wide to the west side, swung open red, painted metal still warm from sun on silent hinges, sent it gliding over hard dirt and grass beat down by repetition and the weight of machines,

waited for the coming combine to growl through the opening, Father tall on its peak, moist with sweat, steel-colored eyes making sure the gate was opened like he thought it should be opened.

He felt Father’s gaze slide over him, unseeing, before moving up to the barn roof they would patch next year, together, hardly speaking except to pass nails. In the smell of gasoline and heat he watched

Father’s head turn to the still-standing corn on the north side of the white house, just over Pauline’s freckled hands.
He closed the west side first, watched as she picked up a full basket of neatly folded linen, her red hair turning orange and corn gold with the coming evening; he loved his mother then, as he closed the east side, loved her because she was beautiful and didn’t ache to be seen.
The Farmer's Wife

With callused knuckles she pounds the dough that's been rising since the sun surfaced through the window above the sink.

She didn't see how the light turned her hair to gold, only the flour rising like her hopes used to rise, sparkling in the newness of morning, the eggs round and tan with youth, the damp smell of yeast.

She folds dough over on itself, hiding the mark of her fist, and she thinks how this is real, her two boys are real, her husband sitting like a soldier on his tractor, swallowed by corn dust, his hands covered with earth, the back of his neck red with sun, is real.

Those years she played basketball, went to state, told her friends she was going to be a nurse, just felt real at the time.

She digs her fingers deep into the forgiving ivory, pressing her lips together so tightly that by the time she is seventy and her husband is dying making her the nurse she no longer wishes to be, they disappear.
Des Moines River 1997

We slipped
our six tight, half-naked bodies
into the gray river water

under the highway 30 bridge,
where parents had warned us

not to go. But late June heat,
and the long purr of perennial cicadas

drew us there, to the valley,
outside of town, the trees

buzzing, the water whispering
for us to come with our shining black

tractor tubes, ride lazy waters under
persistent sun, arms wide,

eyes closed, mouths laughing
as the current pulled at our feet,

our burning thighs, tips
of our playful fingers,

showing us how to touch
and be touched,

how to open our bodies
to the sand below,

the white roots that reached
for us, insects that landed

on our moist skin to drink
the current that carried us.
The Cicada

I find you in the Des Moines,
six legs wide and struggling,
the murky water spins you
in circles, threatens death
by catfish or crappie, calls up
the sanctuary you left, twenty-four
inches under forest floor, sucking
tree root, waiting in nymph form
seventeen years to breed
with your brood and call pharao oohh
until there is nothing else
but your song and the song of one
and a half million others, singing
their incessant hum through
shell-like drums, hypnotizing
the females, promising them infinity.

And despite your black, sectioned body,
and the flutter you cause in my chest
as if you had burrowed there, I scoop
you up, and you almost fill my hand,
poised on needle legs, stretching
your orange-veined wings, waiting
to dry. You will be dead soon,
become one of the empty, placid
shells I am already finding
on my driveway, the memories
of those who have finished, those
who have flagged the forest, laid
their eggs, mated. And after you
lift from my hand with the buzz
of paper wings, I realize, too late,
we are the same age.
New School

I asked for it.
I opened my young,
sweeping thighs and asked
for that thrusting, sexual world,
wanting to bleed out of me
those last moments of childhood.

On a sad, sagging couch
in a dark basement that smelled
like wet carpet, you became
my teacher, and I was a child
again, ready to learn a new pain,
and listen to voices that rise
until they break with frustration,
anger, and passion they don’t
understand, ready to see
for the first time the strength
in my own body, the power
of the womanhood I would learn
to use against you.

With your mounting of my waiting
youth, it was all pushed into me,
the weight of it pressed upon me,
in one thrust of your narrow hips.
When you told me you were pregnant at nineteen, I offered you money because I had it, and thought it might hold your spidery frame, so light the wind could change your mind and sweep you up into passions, wanting to feel the air of desire so hungrily your hollow bones lifted from the earth, the world falling below. How terrible, I thought, to be so weightless.

You didn't take the money, you were too independent for that, and not even the heaviness of lying on a cold, sterile table, thinking about a boy you were not sure you loved, while a stranger vacuumed out your insides, weighted you down. Instead, pieces of you gone forever, you floated to a new level.
I am a woman making muffins

At ten o’clock you said you felt like muffins, and some rooted reflex, planted there by my mother and grandmothers, threw me into the kitchen to collect the green Betty Crocker box from the pantry I had organized like the rest of my life, labels facing out in order of usage for ultimate speed and convenience, and the muffin tin your mother bought me. And as I placed pleated paper cups, pink and blue, in the crevices of the designated pan to be weighted with apple streusel batter, I thought if I just turned on the oven with my face pressed into its dark space and breathed like I was making love to you, I could stop becoming that weak creature that lives only for the happiness of others, that which I promised I would not be.
Sleeping with a Dragon

Sometimes I wake at three in the morning,
tips of my eyelashes burnt black
from your mouth’s open fire.

I know you can’t help your stomach is a furnace,
it’s your nature; I was aware of the danger when we started;
saw your forked tongue when you spoke,
ducked when you belched, felt your fiery breath
on my dreaming face. But I was so cold before,
and your fire warmed my icy fingers, licked
my chilly toes, and the way you spit to light
the stove, the burners, when they went out, made me
crave the smell of singed hair, hot in my nose.

You burnt me, I say to your side of the bed,
to your curved back, rising and falling with the roar
of your breath, and without opening your golden eyes,
you reach one, scaly hand behind you to touch
the curve of my hip, and groan, as if you were sorry.
The hotness of your skin makes me sweat under
dark, sooty sheets; they smell of sulfur and gasoline.
And my once-soft lashes are almost gone,
only shallow roots remain, small and red
under white skin, afraid to re-emerge for fear of fire,
and I can’t say I blame them, who would come
so willingly into the flames?
Just Before I Fell Asleep

I found a place on my bed
that smelled like you,
my face pressed to pink cotton,
the musky memory of soap
and warmth from that afternoon,
the sunlight through white, lace curtains
had laid swirling leaves and roses
over your freckled shoulders,
naked above me. And I remembered
how you hated that pattern,
preferring blinds, darkness to sunlight,
and when I wasn’t looking,
when I had my eyes closed,
not thinking about pink cotton,
seeing only red sunlight through draped lids,
this place had touched you,
sweeping under your arm
to meet that shadowy circle,
or touching the two soft
mounds of your chest.

I inhaled that memory,
slowly, afraid I would use it all
and there would be nothing
left for morning.
And I hated my lungs
for being so small,
or too weak to take
in more of you.
I hated myself for exhaling,
and losing that dim aroma.
I hated the sun inside me,
and my hands trying to shade
the light from your view.
What Was Kept

You are almost gone now,  
the exact sweep of your jaw,  
the smell of your hair,  
the precise brown of your eyes,  
all pale when compared  
to the clothes on the floor,  
this man in my bed.

I cannot extract the feeling  
of loving you, I don’t recall  
how you touched me, if  
you were questioning  
or demanding, if I wanted  
you to come closer or move  
farther away, if I tired

of your olive skin, wanted  
something closer to my own,  
if I wished for the freckles  
of this man, pale enough  
to be my brother, or if it was your  
darkness that made me want you  
in the first place.

But from time to time, I can  
hear your voice, high and wild  
with promises, If you left me,  
I'd just kill myself, see  
your long fingers and the dirty nails  
you consumed between your straight,  
milky teeth. I see them

pointing, pointing at me,  
your voice roaring, calling me  
bitch, selfish, mean, whore, stupid,  
and without your tone changing,  
I just love you more than you love me,  
would do anything for you,  
that’s just the kinda guy I am,

and I feel the anger rise  
like it used to rise, to my chest  
and throat like bile, until
I don't know what to do
with it, unable to swallow,
too willful to let it fall
to the floor between us.
CONCLUSION

After examining Rich’s work, I realized that I am currently within the equivalent of what was Rich’s daughter stage. This is not to say that I am on the same path as Rich, although we do share the common goals of liberation and transformation. In fact, I believe all women poets experience similar biographical and biological influences in their work. It would be impossible to completely divorce the life-changing and life-defining stages a woman experiences from her work as an artist. A woman’s labels of daughter, sister, mother, and wife, among others, define not only the way a woman views herself and the way others view her, but also how she reacts to her surroundings and how she then creates.

I see myself in the daughter stage not because I am only literally a daughter, but when I read my own work, I see myself reaching out for literary mothers, as sitting at the feet of those women poets to whom I have been exposed, or to which I have exposed myself, drawing inspiration as well as determination. This is strongly evident in the first poem, “The Will to Change,” which is titled after Rich’s collection of poetry and includes an epigraph from the collection. Rich serves as inspiration not only in the titling of the poem and the idea for the poem, but also in its form and focus on the importance of dates. And, throughout the collection as a whole, my focus on mother figures and the relationship of women to women further supports this suggestion. Poems like “Cigarettes in a Kitchen” show not only this focus on a maternal environment, but also a rejection of that environment. The speaker of the poem is attempting liberation from those women who are re-enforcers of patriarchy by creating an environment where women are encouraged to be in conflict.
Although Rich and I share common goals and compose poetry in free verse, our messages are presented very differently. My poetry concentrates on concrete objects and subjects and attempts to elevate them to a new level of meaning. Such as “The Cicada,” which describes only one object, a perennial cicada, in an attempt to not only express a realization for the speaker of the poem, but to move the reader to that same realization, or at least something like it. “The Farmer’s Wife” is centered on not an object, but one woman and her actions, a woman trapped by her place, geographically and sexually. Rich’s poetry is not so concrete, switching pronouns or titling her poetry with dates or actions, keeping her readers focused on the message or meaning, making them draw their own conclusions, forcing them to agree or disagree. I believe my poetry is more balanced in its simultaneous focus on message and the rediscovery of the ordinary.

These differences are important as I believe them to be representative of a new generation of poets. Poets like Rich, who broke away from formal verse and experimented with form as well as political content, made it possible for poets such as myself to write not only as a woman and from a political place, but freely while still creating a beautiful work of art. As Rich explained, “I believe that there need be no sacrifice of beauty in committed art” (Dan). A poem, such as “The Attack,” can be committed to a statement regarding female relationships, describe something grotesque, and, at the same time, use beautiful language to do so. The current generation of aspiring poets is not being told that poetry is to be formal, in imitation of previous poets, non-political, or that in order for it to be political it must sacrifice beauty. Because of poets like Rich, I write as a woman without feeling the need to censor myself. Of course, the generation to which I belong is not by any means the answer to
the battle for a common language, a world without patriarchy, or any of the other social ills that exist, but perhaps we are another step.

You can dream these changes, you can imagine a different society, a whole regeneration of human relationships, but you will not see it. You can see partially, you can see little efforts, little gushes up, welling up of that great underground stream, but it's not going to be there in your lifetime because history works slowly (Dan).
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


Ostriker, Writing Like a Woman


