

Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World*

I

A dark woman, head bent, listening for something
- a woman's voice, a man's voice or
voice of the freeway, night after night, metal streaming downcoast
past eucalyptus, cypress, agribusiness empires
THE SALAD BOWL OF THE WORLD, gurr of small planes
dusting the strawberries, each berry picked by a hand
in close communion, strawberry blood on the wrist,
Malathion in the throat, communion,
the hospital at the edge of the fields,
prematures slipping from unsafe wombs,
the labour and delivery nurse on her break watching
planes dusting rows of pickers.

Elsewhere declarations are made: at the sink
rinsing strawberries flocked and gleaming, fresh from market
one says: "On the pond this evening is a light
finer than my mother's handkerchief
received from her mother, hemmed and initialled
by the nuns in Belgium."

One says: "I can lie for hours
reading and listening to music. But sleep comes hard.
I'd rather lie awake and read." One writes:

"Mosquitoes pour through the cracks
in this cabin's walls, the road
in winter is often impassable,

I live here so I don't have to go out and act,
I'm trying to hold onto my life, it feels like nothing."

One says: "I never knew from one day to the next
where it was coming from: I had to make my life happen
from day to day. Every day an emergency.

Now I have a house, a job from year to year.
What does that make me?"

In the writing workshop a young man's tears
wet the frugal beard he's grown to go with his poems
hoping they have redemption stored
in their lines, maybe will get him home free. In the classroom
eight-year-old faces are grey. The teacher knows which children
have not broken fast that day,
remembers the Black Panthers spooning cereal.

I don't want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake,
tore up her writing, through the kerosene
lantern into her face waiting
like an unbearable mirror of his own. I don't
want to hear how she finally ran from the trailer
how he tore the keys from her hands, jumped into the truck
and backed it into her. I don't want to think
how her guesses betrayed her - that he meant well, that she
was really the stronger and ought not to leave him
to his own apparent devastation. I don't want to know
wreckage, dreck and waste, wild tree frogs calling in
another season, light and music still pouring over
our fissured, cracked terrain.

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VII

Here is a map of our country:
here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt
This is the haunted river flowing from brow to groin
we dare not taste its water
This is the desert where missiles are planted like corns
This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms
This is the birthplace of the rockabilly boy
This is the cemetery of the poor
who died for democracy This is a battlefield
from a nineteenth-century war the shrine is famous
This is the sea-town of myth and story when the fishing fleets
went bankrupt here is where the jobs were on the pier
processing frozen fish sticks hourly wages and no shares
These are other battlefields Centralia Detroit here are the forests
primeval the copper the silver lodes
These are the Suburbs of acquiescence silence rising fume like from the streets
This is the capital of money and dolor whose spires
flare up through air inversions whose bridges are crumbling
whose children are drifting blind alleys pent
between coiled rolls of razor wire
I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural
then yes let it be these are small distinctions
where do we see it from is the question

XIII (Dedications)

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a grey day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains' enormous spaces around you.

I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight
but you cannot leave yet. I know you are reading this poem
as the underground train loses momentum and before running
up the stairs
toward a new kind of love
your life has never allowed.

I know you are reading this poem by the light
of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide
while you wait for the newscast from the intifada.

I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.

I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
count themselves out, at too early an age. I know
you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
because even the alphabet is precious.

I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your
hand

because life is short and you too are thirsty.

I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.

I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.

I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
left to read

there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

-Eastern War Time, I,

Memory lifts her smoky mirror: 1943,
single isinglass window kerosene
stove in the streetcar barn halfset moon
8:15 a.m. Eastern War Time dark
Number 29 clanging in and turning
looseleaf notebook Latin for Americans
Breasted's History of the Ancient World
on the girl's lap
money for lunch and war-stamps in her pocket
darkblue wool wet acrid on her hands
three pools of light weak ceiling bulbs
a schoolgirl's hope-split terrified
sensations wired to smells
of kerosene wool and snow
and the sound of the dead language
praised as key torchlight of the great dead
Grey spreading behind still-flying snow
the lean and sway of the streetcar she must ride
to become one of a hundred girls
rising white-cuffed and collared in a study hall
to sing For those in peril on the sea
under plaster casts of the classic frescoes
chariots horses draperies certitudes.