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The work contained here was written for *ENG 549: The Personal Is Political (Adrienne Rich)*, a seminar organized by Benjamin Friedlander at the University of Maine, spring 2019.

Introduction: *There is no more appropriate beginning to a collection exploring the works of Adrienne Rich than “Dear Adrienne.” Although a number of the entries in this collection use epistolary form, Dubois has chosen to address these to Rich herself; using this construct to both respond to Rich’s poetry and prose as well as employing Rich’s work as a vehicle to explore her own. Throughout this text Dubois has elaborated on her own material through the use of footnotes to provide insight and context as Rich did, often years after the original work had been published. Even more akin to Rich than the methods of presentation, Dubois’ writing ventures into places that force one to consider the power of feeling, whether physical or otherwise and owns her words without apology.—Rebecca Tkacs*

**Dear Adrienne
K. Dubois**

Dear Adrienne,

What now, we’re fucking screwed.
By which I mean, the question is no longer
wherefore, but where gone? *You must
change your life**. Out of what kind
of sleepwalking did the line wake you?

I’m reading you tonight. As I might record
names carved on tombs of stone.† Like Rilke, I’m

* This epistolary & lyrical prose finds its initial impetus in Rich’s “Not how to Write Poetry, but Wherefore,” in which she quotes the last line from Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo:” *You must change your life*. The epistle places Rich’s essay in dialogue with her own self-addressed epistolary poems from *Contradictions* and serves as a ground for exploring my own relationship to poetry and poetics.

† Rich’s own poem begins: “Dear Adrienne: // I’m calling you up tonight / as I might call up a friend [...] / to ask what you intend to do / with the rest of our life.”

looking for a master. * Someone to tell me where I ought to place my intentions. My life. Sometimes I act as if I have all the time there is.

Dear Adrienne,

I cannot find sequence. Speaking in complete sentences gives me the shakes. My ~~abjection~~ objection is not a response to failure. It lends all communication a sense of adventure. Perform the logic. The thought. I like to think I don't mind if you misunderstand me.

Dear Adrienne,

Everything is syntactic tissue.

Dear Adrienne:

I am not a sure thing.
I am a sharp thing. A small thing. A fragile, volatile thing. † But not a sure thing. a quiet thing. I wanted

* Mark Doty contextualizes Rilke's poem on poets.org, explaining that Rilke "attemptsto link himself to that source [the statue], even broken or lost, of authority, power, or vision." The poem as prayer. The poem as an act of name-giving. Of saying the unsayable. As making the whole visible.

† This poem, in its entirety, is in dialogue with "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying." A particularly relevant and striking quote: "There is a danger run by all powerless people: that we forget we are lying, or that lying becomes a weapon we carry over into relationships with people who do not have power over us." I'm particularly interested in the ways that Rich sees lying as an intuitive female response to the characteristic lying of systemic patriarchal manipulative structures. *Facts we needed have been withheld from us. False witness has been borne against us.* Rich establishes a dichotomous relationship linking truth with speaking and silence with lies when "lying (described as discretion) becomes an easy

& They know this. Everyone knows this. The words. Poems. You knew it and your words know it too. Teeth for gnashing the tremble out: Rift. Rip. Scattered. Your thumb lingers on the scar just below my bottom lip. Raised. Where the truth busted through. I forgot how to swallow it*.

Dear Adrienne,

We can pre-order our abandoned condition. I read it once on a sign at the career fair. Invent it. Good intentions like gender & defensive postures. We take up like teaspoon queries obscuring your reflection in the glass. Here is equilibrium. Your restless tinkering of scale. Grains to hold out for or against it all.

Dear Adrienne,

It takes up so much space, the weeping. The ambivalence. We cannot help this[†]. I too jettisoned

way to avoid conflict or complication” (190). Employing silence as a form of self-preservation becomes problematic for us, Rich explains, when our trust--Rich: “We take so much of the universe on trust. . .I allow my universe to change in minute, significant ways, on the basis of things you have said to me, of my trust in you.”--is broken or taken advantage of. Rich alludes to an instance in which one woman betrays the trust of another--perhaps a woman in Rich’s own life--but her characterization of the effects, in my opinion, encompass something essential (and genderless) that occurs inside us when we learn that someone we trusted cannot be trusted any longer: “we are brought close to formlessness.” To come out of formlessness, and into language--into truth-- is to be a sharp thing. A dangerous thing.

*Rich knows that “the unconscious wants the truth, as the body does” and the poem explores in kind the connections between truth, the body, and the ways in which we become conscious of the unconscious; how the body remembers and records its own refusals.

[†] The first few lines of this epistle are intended to be in loose conversation with Rich’s writing on women and community, with the more salient of those allusions being to “When we dead awaken: Writing as Re-

loyalty. The house of my father.* I too believe in utopian ghosts. I know you would say, Adrienne, that “Despair, when not the response to absolute physical and moral defeat, is, like war, the failure of imagination†.” Imagination. A victim of lost faith.

Dear Adrienne:

Though the dentist disagrees I only catch myself clenching my jaw at night. The blood-rush drowns out the dark. Sounds inside the walls. Water down pipes. The joints creaking. Sockets worse for wear. Gummed up. Poor circulation. Pressure‡. Only

Vision,” with attention being paid to how an awakening consciousness can be “confusing, disorienting, and painful,” to experience. I also see this in dialogue with Rich’s characterization of the woman who’s “acutely conscious” of being overheard by men, and the doublespeak--which is sometimes misinterpreted as ambivalence-- that often occurs in response.

* Allusion to Rich’s poem “Rift”: “and absolute loyalty was never in my line / once having left it in my father’s house—.”

† Quoted from “Not how to write Poetry, but Wherefore.”

‡ This poem alludes to Rich’s relationship to her body and chronic illness in her poetry. The veil of it. In mind was her poem, “Calibrations,” from *A Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth*, where she writes:

Ghost limbs go into spasm in the night

[...]

What you can’t bear

carry endure lift

you’ll have to drag

It’s my sense that Rich’s experience with rheumatoid arthritis, the autoimmune disease that prematurely ended her life, informs the tone and content of this poem, which, in addition to pain, explores and contrasts the mortality of humans with the relative immortality of poetry / poems.

without power* do we realize how loud electricity
is. And still. We each bear our own groaning.

* The “power” of electricity in this line, and the poem in its entirety, is also in dialogue with Rich’s
“Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying.”

Introduction: *Kristina King constructs a discussion between Adrienne Rich and Jill Stauffer by analyzing the ways in which ethical loneliness can frame representation. She attends to the ways in which Rich views oppression and dehumanization through Rich's experiences that extends itself as recognizable through sharing these intersectional experiences with that of Stauffer's texts surrounding the repression of voices through the "failure of just-minded people to hear well."*—Cassidy Marsh

Being, Naming, Seeing — the Ethics and Politics of Intersubjectivity

Kristina King

*But the significant feature of the desperate man reveals itself
when he meets other desperate men, directly or vicariously;
and he experiences his first kindness, someone to strain with him,
to strain to see him as he strains to see himself,
someone to understand, someone to accept the regard,
the love, that desperation forces into hiding.*

-Adrienne Rich, "An Atlas of the Difficult World: X"

Nearly universal to human experience is the sting of being left out; of being excluded, actively or passively, from a conversation, from consideration; this sting is broadly familiar, and acutely felt. The deeper, sustained loneliness evoked by the end of a romance, or felt in the wake of the loss of a friend or loved one; felt when living, perhaps for the first time, in a new city, knowing no one — many or most can relate to such experiences of being lonely. That feeling cracks the world, the self — but we heal. We repair.

There is another kind of "loneliness," developed not out of a sense of loss or of removal, or of exclusion from one's community; *this* loneliness stems from a person's lifelong experience of utter neglect by society. Exclusion, rejection, denial are not the exceptions for the subject of this type of loneliness; they are the rule, the everyday experience. This continual condemnation or (worse) lack of recognition results in the formation of a diminished and broken self — an

erosion of the soul. If exclusion and continual pain, and what we might describe as dis-integration, are inherent to someone's experience of the social world, then this phenomenon needs to be addressed, and in a particular way that holds each of us accountable, in reconsidering how we conduct our interactions with others.

The loneliness of the "only," the token, often doesn't feel like loneliness but like a kind of dead echo chamber. Certain things that ought to don't resonate. Somewhere Beverly Smith writes of women of color "inspiring the behavior" in each other. When there's nobody to "inspire the behavior," act out of the culture, there is an atrophy, a dwindling, which is partly invisible....

-Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root"

Adrienne Rich, in both her poetry and her prose, examines and describes loneliness. Rich is perhaps most known and appreciated by literary critics and theorists for the consideration she demanded for the lesbian experience, and by extension, for —simply— *experience*. She consistently emphasized her identity as a woman; a mother; a lesbian; a Jew; and a feminist, both in her writing methodology and in the themes she continually investigated in her writing. Her perspective, inevitably shaped by her experiences, is that "naming" is a particular type of "consciousness" (*Split at the Root*) — of self, of the world, of where these meet and mingle. She writes that "those who have the power to name...socially construct reality" (*Blood, Bread, Poetry*). Naming functions then, for Rich, both as a technology to reach new and deeper understanding, and as an assertion of existence. Rich's work to attend to the tacit or unacknowledged parts of human experience can be seen to complement Jill Stauffer's articulation of *ethical* loneliness; the "ethical" component underpinning the relationship of *self* to *other* is of substantial interest to both scholars.

Stauffer, in *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, calls for a reconsideration of the ethical implications of naming as a kind of *co-authoring* of each other, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of self (*Existence and Existents*) as an orientation to questioning what it means to participate in that relationship responsibly. "If we misunderstand what autonomy is and what conditions its successful exercise requires, we may fail to comprehend how the selves and worlds of some human beings can be destroyed by other human

beings,” (Stauffer, 21). Stauffer describes neglect of the “other,” especially of those belonging to un-/underacknowledged, marginalized social groups, as being *as* or *more* damaging than physical abuse of another’s body. Representation of one’s self (and the perception of self by the “other” subject) is, then, a cooperative project of being — and to neglect (intentionally, or even out of mere habit or ignorance) that cooperative authorship is to harmfully limit the development of another person’s social self. Stauffer’s text then usefully serves as a critical lens for interpreting various iterations of Rich’s “naming” as creating a consciousness of others’ experiences (often, Rich offers her own experiences as a kind of lightning rod for recognition by others). In another sense, Rich’s works, and her considerations of experience (of self, other, and each other) can be seen to concretize Stauffer’s plea for ethical recognition of “other” — to address what Rich calls “the guilt of not knowing” (“Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity,” 478).

Ethical Loneliness evolved from an initial project of attending to Jean Améry’s life and writings, including his experiences during the Holocaust. Stauffer attends briefly to Améry’s critique of Hannah Arendt’s characterization of the “banality” of evil in her text “Eichmann in Jerusalem” — his position is that “the inescapable reality of violence cannot be called banal by those who suffer it,” (14) and that “[w]hat one tends to call ‘normal life’ may coincide with anticipatory imagination and trivial statement’ (26).” Stauffer mentions that Améry has misunderstood Arendt’s use of “banality,” but acknowledges the spirit behind his critique — that the particular form of loneliness described above (caused by “dehumanization, oppression, and abandonment”) is caused by (among other things) the “failure of just-minded people to hear well” — and that the causes and redresses of that failure are *political* (2). Everyday acts, communications, relationships, are all personal in the way we experience them, and political by nature of their impact.

The “intersubjective formation” of the self (x) through an examination of “ethical loneliness,” as Stauffer articulates it, is a useful companion to much of Rich’s work. Stauffer says on p. 22, “[Fatigue, weariness, and indolence] may reveal to those who choose to look a relation to time and other beings that both redefines what a self is and helps us understand that selves and worlds are not essences but are, rather, cooperatively authored achievements and, as such, *may be destroyed*,” (22, emphasis added). “Ethical loneliness begins when a human being, because of abuse or neglect, has been refused the human relation necessary for self-formation

and thus is unable to take on the present moment freely,” (26). Inherent to this collaborative formation, then, is engagement — the co-authoring requires, by both parties, authoring and acknowledgement. It requires stories to be told, and to be heard.

Rich, in strategic and diverse ways, tells stories. She tells her own, in a way that lends others her visibility — the power of her platform as a successful writer, as someone raised by academics, and in the middle-class, where she had access to certain types of economic and political capital. She lends her voice to the stories of groups with less power to represent themselves — those who have been subject to “ethical loneliness” by dominant social groups throughout history (see *Inscriptions*, “Necessities of Life,” “Mother-in-Law”). Rich does this in a deliberative and cautious way, and I find myself often speculating about whether certain semantical choices, for her, had deep ethical underpinnings as well. One small example plucked back out of the accretion of many such moments is the title of her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” After writing the introduction for Tyler Tallmadge’s own text in this collection, I asked Tyler to give it a glance and tell me his thoughts, wanting my own commentary to do some justice to his work. Tyler gently pointed out to me that I had misrepresented the title of Rich’s text in my introduction: “I’m sorry — I believe it’s actually ‘Lesbian Existence and not *the* Lesbian Existence.’” Of course, he was right, and as I revised my brief remarks, I considered the implications to the title’s meaning from the change in wording. Rich seemed to me to have specifically not named her experience of lesbian existence “*the*” experience, and in this seemingly tiny compositional choice, she had implicitly left the door open for other articulations of lesbian experience to supplement or complicate her own.

Accordingly, these social acts of articulating can not be neatly compartmentalized; it is worth noting, particularly in light of Stauffer’s work, that Rich lent her visibility and her practice to naming the experiences of others — people whose identities intersected her own in subtle ways, or in distant ways. In her critical prose, Rich’s intentions are particularly visible, because her meta-discursive methodology in writing is often to call attention to the fact of her subjective experience of the world. Her writings on *teaching* are of compounded interest for this reason — she discusses her pedagogical strategies and goals explicitly, revealing her sense of social responsibility in layers. Rich’s descriptions of her experiences teaching in New York City in the 1960s in the Era of Open Admissions (“Teaching Language in Open Admissions”), were an opportunity for her to process and explain her role in the education system; in the same

conversation, she addressed and at times even prioritized recognizing the experiences of her students. She noted the challenges presented by having to do one's homework on the subway, which was and in many places still would not be counted among the challenges students *tend* to face as they pursue an education, (60). Rich described the socio-economic class divides she witnessed, that many of her students experienced, in a way that highlighted the need for a reconceptualization of classroom pedagogy.

This kind of project seems, to me, to be the most important implication of the feminism Rich articulated and, in doing so, enacted. Her work to position *naming*, or describing experience, as a political act to claim one's identity, advanced a powerful but accessible way to combat underrepresentation and erasure — to combat “ethical loneliness.”

We all know that there is another story to be told.

-Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”

Introduction 1: *In the text that follows, “Compulsory Heterosexuality within Bisexuality & XXI Poems” by Cassidy Marsh, we see Adrienne Rich’s own 21 Love Poems re-imagined. In a parallel sequence that employs as many formal techniques as there are ways of loving, Marsh explicitly foregrounds bisexual experience. Her poems are at once raw, tender, and speculative as they abandon the conventional “talk of / love as it if were / singular” and explore a kind of existence that’s “one step closer to the inbetween.” Marsh follows up her poems with an informal prose piece very much in dialogue with Rich’s critical work, where with a tone that’s both informed and vulnerable, she contextualizes her project and roots in Rich’s established interrogations of patriarchal norms.—K. Dubois*

Introduction 2: *Cassidy Marsh’s “Twenty-One Poems” is a showcase of intimacy with a focus on “the body.” Teeth, hair, arms, hands, palms, fingers, and thighs are physical images employed by the poet throughout the sequence. The entanglement of these items are emblematic of the poet’s experience as well as her presentation of the human experience. “I look at the perfect curvature of your thumbnail/Rather than the pictures you are showing me/And we lay our heads side by side so that/Your curls grip tightly to my tresses,” (VII).*

Marsh is also interested in articulating the fluidity of bisexual space. “I go on dates with men who smell like steak marinade,/ I kiss girls on couches in basements,” (I). She writes in her “explanation” section, “When I was 17 I began to question this more deeply. I thought of the friendships I had had with women that were more than platonic; friends that had asked to kiss me when it was just the two of us in the room, friends that would play with my hair affectionately, shrouding my body with theirs as we sat together on the couch,” (An Explanation). Marsh navigates the ever-changing social sphere with a concern for the arbitrary lines of romance. She notes that communication with women hinges upon

an attention to body language, while communication with men hinges upon a focus on dialogue.

Adrienne Rich's influence on Marsh's poetry is situated around tradition. She cites a "heteronormative script" as being a source of that tradition. A comparison worth making is Marsh's idea of "heteronormative script" seems comparable to musicians who play their tunes with sheet music nearby. Rules, traditions, and order all come to mind with that sort of musical output, whereas her idea of the communication with women seems more comparable to jazz; a focus on improvisation, natural instinct, and interpretation as a means of generating understanding.—Matthew Hammond

Compulsory Heterosexuality within Bisexuality & XXI Poems

Cassidy Marsh

I

I am thinking of the many things that
 Could be done rather than to think of you;
 Like the dishes, the wash
 Instead of your nervous hands interloping
 Your fingers together, twisting at your knuckles.
 I could be thinking about making some sort
 Of new art, some sort of made thing, complete
 With intrication that comes from careful
 Contemplating, rather than your lashes
 Darker than I've ever seen;
 how you look up at me from underneath,
 petrified and always hesitant
 —and from what? Where do your fears
 Ebb and flow and how might I float atop the changing
 Tides? When will your avoidance soothe your trembling
 Hands that still have not ceased playing with one another.
 Will you speak to me again
 with your impish smile after a quip,
 Or a pitch change in my laugh, or when

You think I am not looking—looking
 at me as though you have stumbled upon a poem,
 And I can't think of anything else.

Yet I want to, but alas cannot:
 I go on walks, I won't cut corners.
 I avoid the casino, the bars and alleyways.
 I go on dates with men who smell like steak marinade,
 I kiss girls on couches in basements.

But you are always there in my loneliness;
 Haunting me like a house with no walls to hang pictures,
 No walls to compartmentalize.

II

In the blue tones of this house party—I
 Look for you in the corner of the room.
 You aren't there, of course, but your voice comes from
 behind me—the one telling the boys to go away.
 He jumps out of the seat next to me
 And tells me to fuck off.

We leave the party and go
 for a walk
 On the rain stained
 sidewalk, the moon
 Making puddles silver
 with tears.

*What a great night for
 remembrances,*
 you whisper
 softly into the fuzz of my
 ear.

A cat looks at me
 suspiciously.
 Nobody trusts us

Not even
animals.

A friend walks by and says hello.
I introduce you
But he says you aren't there—you either are or not
Even though your hair smells like strawberries.

III

All this talk of
Love as if it were
Singular
As if the plurals
Were all as once—
How could I ever
Love another like
Another when the
Loves oscillate around
Suspended in the air
Juggling around like
A clown entertaining
A child.
But for whose enjoyment?
Certainly not our own,
Certainly there are other ways
To experience joy.

I could never
Enjoy a singular love
The way I have enjoyed ours;

No, never quite the same.

IV

Hands, so well acquainted
and unfamiliar as they reproach
Our space—my mind has escaped
And we have gone looking underneath

The thistles and mossed granite. You
 Dive into a glassy pool, *it's here somewhere*.
 You are sure.
 And I dive in after you.

I come up for air only after it is too late and I choke out
 Your name, although it is too late.

I think of you in childhood, me as
 Child—our hands holding
 And knowing, and perhaps others
 Knew too, what I still had to learn,
 What you will have to learn.

V
 With him it is sweat and
 panting.
 My parts parted for viewing,
 It is me looking down at him
 as
 He looks up and it is fast—so
 fast!
 I am doing a good job.
 Our hair mangled together,
 ripping out
 at the root. It is power, the
 pleasure in power.
 Taking it, inverting his gaze
 upon me
 against him—only to be used
 in this
 Moment. It is softness
 inverted,
 It is voiceless.

With her it is unknown, it is
 bottomless ocean,
 Endless sea outside the bay
 window,

That we are tasked with
mapping out.
And the question of how to
learn
And who already knows. It is
Gentle, the only hesitation
Being if we should
Rather for our own self
serving pleasure
And what pleasure is without
self servature?

VI

The broken state of modern men existing in a state of intimacy avoidance taught from boyhood to whenever that ends, which is debatable if it really truly ever does or not— We seem to measure man on the inability to empathize rather than their willingness to show vulnerability; the root of growth. Fuck the softness that becomes tacit with extensions of empathy. And technology enables this fear; this need to isolate with endless bodies who, I too, would love to walk inside of. Why face this softness when you can engage with endlessly indifferent people—with the hope you might start to like one of them enough to reluctantly commit to a need for human connection. Nah, man. Assume a woman who is soft towards you is demanding something you can't give. So ask me to be indifferent as to whether you are alive or not; do not appear eager, even though you want to, I will be lukewarm. How can you tell me I'm wrong when your face says otherwise—I've been reading bodies for longer than you, surviving by leafing through their pages while their heads are turned. And yours have been the hardest, most unlike reading. And more the structuring of a poem—slicing through every twitch of your brow like a caesura. And you must know what I know. Oh, how I can tell when it pleases you to have me fill in all those blanks, how stealthy you must feel to catch your gaze on the hair tucked behind my ear. We are like the same ends of a magnet, always attracted to the

wrong way; the space between us never closer, the space
between us never closer.

VII

I look at the perfect curvature of your thumbnail
Rather than the pictures you are showing me
And we lay our heads side by side so that
Your curls grip tightly to my tresses;
Looking as though our hair is tangled to one head

You say, *Hey*
 are you paying attention

To the villages and people of your memories.
But I lay my cheek in the soft enclave of your neck
Your lips barely grazing my forehead as you ask

What did you do today.

VIII

Your body will haunt me
From the salt of the estranged
sea
Through a cleft of light I feel
estrangement, yes.
Yes loneliness, and yes
estrangement.
The backs of our heads always
talking
As if we can't hear them.

VIII

There were once your hands
That threw baseballs

And bent your wrists when you emphasized
A point

Which seems neglected now
Neglected like your agency

Or perhaps it is considered
autonomy in this moment.

How do we come to know the codes,
or either hack the encryption before us?

We spoke once about the feminine brain
How you considered yourself partial

But men aren't partial
They either are or they aren't

And one step closer to the *inbetween*
Set you apart from the rest

Invalidating the rest
That you so wished to be.

X

We were drunk on
margaritas and
everyone else was up
at the bar.
The band barely
playing, but you
insisted
On my small body,
so small compared to
yours,
to let yours guide
mine.
and I did as you told
despite the room
exploding with my
blush

*Look at my boobs in
this bra, they feel
amazing, I said.*
You did, smiling at
my surprise as you
cupped them in your
hands.
Then you twirled me
around as nobody
looked

XI

It is not short
It is not intelligent
It is not argumentative
It is not hesitant

It is not blue
It is not sky
It is not hues
It is not rhyme

It is not avoidant
It is not overall
It is not prudish
It is not casual

It is long
and yawning—
a softened thing
after time and time and time

It is the contradiction
of your self
and mine

XII

I said goodbye to leaves
And slept so deep my nose
began to bleed
as I dreamt of your refrain.

I made my song soft,
explicit and caught
letting the tendered thrum
beckon towards your drums—

but your silence is always temporary,
always hesitant
to begin the ensemble again

but eyes barely meeting,
so cold and blue
in the afternoon of this room,
search to make meaning.

And I can't help but peak
the opening of your collar, your door
the way your feet point towards mine down streets.
Why do you wear *those* shoes; leathered, without socks?
When did you go home last night.

I mistook myself as a writer's deed
bent over knees until
you heard me read
and seed my songs that need

I found you rooting around
my desk until you found my resting flowers,
whipping my backside, making them shower
their petals down my thighs

And you wanted to hear me say;
You are subject
 But I object

And I want to know where the dust
 has settled in your chest
 while you sit at your desk

the pencil back in your mouth,
 your broad mouth

XIII

Ungroomed

And opaque—

you mustn't mind
 You could never mind a thing
 so simple,
 Not the footfalls on
 the stairs at midnight
 Nor the garments I left beside the laundry basket,
 forgetting all too well that

You are a minded thing.

XIV

How to appear soft
 In the context of the toxic.

How is it to feel this
 softness too—

yet

My fingertips extend towards yours \anyway.

XV

It was a pair of thighs
 that parted the seas

Lay sigh by sigh
 my leg once propped on your side;
 I could fall in love
 with anyone.

I wait for your welcome
 to tell me what I want.
 who to say
 what as I say what
 —to who?

I spit on strangers from clouds
 hung out to dry
 & wait by the sea

for you to arrive I wait for you
 to arrive I wait for you to arrive I —
 Wait, you said to wait?
 for you to arrive.

wretch!
 I don't want to kiss your lips,
 the drive for flesh

or the *ringing* of it—

 pleasure will beget
 pleasure limb
 be-comes limb

XVI

How do you want me
 to look at you?

Where do you want
 My eyes to settle in
 this quiet.

If words are lost on you,
 find them
 tired and hollow

in my mouth,

find them
 spread in between
 Sighs—

woven together
 arms and arms
 estranged apart.

For now,
 place your palms
 against this purlieu
 of earthly encumbrances.
 a temple that appears
 only after the sounds of prey having come at dusk
 to beg at its doors.

It delights in the rose-hued blue-toned
 pain of your suffering/offering
 to this promised land
 Succor; you want your torso, my skin sweet as milk

together; you repeat prayers
 from muscle memory,
 while I play the hymns
 soundless on my lips
 —forming the oblong words
 through my teeth.

And is the night
 growing tender?

each silence, temporarily,
 Satiated.

XVII

arms and arms and arms entangled between thighs and oh my, my, my's! *Hands on hands on hands*. These hands, those hands; these fingers, those fingers. together torqued round the other. crushing off circulation. blooming scarlet at the surface of our skins. Our skins singing between layers. All our skins blooming, lushing; a silky murmur only to one another.

Then thigh over thigh on thigh over thigh, every pull from my torso weighing on your spine, every vertebrae clenching in sweet tension. Perspiration blossoms atop our heads. our heads knocking back and forth. our heads barely structurally sound on our necks, clavicles dancing their rattled dances, sinewy tendons straining to hold on. Your neck finds mine for stability; slithers itself against my throat and solicits the windpipe within.

Bruisey and purpled, my neck laughs and asks if yours wants a turn. It says yes, an eye for an eye and our eyes exchange for the other. Your calves laughter ringing with vigor as they wrestle mine to the ground. But my belly becomes disappointed in your body; so my feet walk away. Yours decide they want to stay in for the rest of the evening and will see you at dinner. Our tongues follow.

I tell them to come back; they say they've had enough and I should too. But my shoulders care for your shoulders and my torso fits itself in the hollow between your ribs and hips. My ribs rip themselves apart. My hips lie to your face.

XVIII

Hair

I will give you mine in sweet clumps
shaven off with the thorns
of flowers blooming in the bedroom big
white ones dancing in the window that
smell like rot in their water

XVIII

*I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow,
Never minding the unwanted arrangement of
our inarticulate existence—
The underside of unwritten books behind
shelves
And somehow, each of us will help the other
live,
In our youth the weeks between another
Missing each other, as years do
Their hands clasped together as mothers and
daughters do
And daughters and daughters do
As sisters, too
We fear the inarticulate, my face in those years
There is need in this loss,
And somewhere, each of us must help the other
die*

XX

*Can it be growing colder
when
I begin to touch myself
again
The heat from your faces,*

the many
 reflecting
 Off the moon,
 I begin to tell you apart
 from the rest
 Your mother, your father,
 a sister if you had one, a brother
 Caught somewhere
 between the ghosts of us
 And *how we had tried to*
love—I loved
 Drowning in the solitude
 of your soul, your heavy
 shadows
 Bouncing from the beams
 of moonlight
 While I sit like the color of a stone
 In pain
 across that space

XXI

If I could let you know
 The first I wanted of accidents
 to happen:

How we move into and come to love :
these are the forces they had ranged against us,
And these are the forces they had ranged
against us,
Within us and against us, against us and within
us

I had wanted your body and my
 body and her body and her body
 and his body—the pure
 invention of the thing; the
 softness of gold, the open
 curtains. In my arrogance I
 caught hold of chartered
 systems
 And thought, *It could be written*
with new meaning, the maps
they gave us were out of date.

The ocean rages while the water
 still holds out for a dance.
 The languages of the seas speak
 By echoing in our bloodstream,
Raven and the wren chasing
 each other while ahead the
 clouds mist out. They want to
 touch their worlds together,
 even in sleep.

An Explanation:

After looking at Adrienne Rich's critical work, I started to develop some questions in regard to bisexuality. Rich examines the ways in which women are subjected to power that is not their own, how women experiences are not viewed as the norm

...—to debrief yourselves, we might call it, of the false messages of your education in this culture, the messages telling you that women have not really cared about power or learning or creative opportunities because of a psychobiological need to serve men and produce children; that only a few atypical women have been exceptions to this rule; *the messages telling you that woman's experience is neither normative nor central to human experience*. You have the training and the tools to do independent research, to evaluate data, to criticize, and to express language in visual forms what you discover. (emphasis mine, "What Does a Women Need to Know," 4)

I am interested in the hierarchical power dynamics between the gender binaries, how as a bisexual person you must switch between these embedded social codes when pursuing intimacy and relationships. Rich discusses primarily her own lesbian experience as a way to create a lesbian discourse that exemplified an authentic female experience and differed from that of the gay/straight male perspective that was so emphasized during that time period. While today there is discourse for heteronormative culture and gay/lesbian culture, I have found that there is an erasure of *the inbetween*, where I am situated. While gendered codes are inherent in hetero-dating culture, they are hard to navigate in the homo world. Although I understand and also agree with the term "heteronormative," I am also drawn to *compulsory heterosexuality*, the term Rich uses. I couldn't quite articulate my emotional reaction in the moment of reading Compulsory

Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, but for a long time I sensed within myself a compulsion towards men and thought of my attraction to women as purely sexual, more of a party trick than anything else,

The most pernicious message relayed by pornography is that women are natural sexual prey to men and love it, that sexuality and violence are congruent, and that for women sex is essentially masochistic, humiliation pleasurable, physical abuse erotic. But along with this message comes another, not always recognized: that enforced submission and the use of cruelty, if played out in heterosexual pairing, is sexually ‘normal,’ while sensuality between women, including erotic mutuality and respect, is ‘queer,’ ‘sick,’ and either pornographic in itself or not very exciting compared with the sexuality of whips and bondage.” (Compulsory Heterosexuality 40)

When I was 17 I began to question this more deeply. I thought of the friendships I had had with women that were more than platonic; friends that had asked to kiss me when it was just the two of us in the room, friends that would play with my hair affectionately, shrouding my body with theirs as we sat together on the couch. And the feeling that resonates inside of you when both are aware of a romantic intimacy. For much of high school, these interactions would scare me. I didn’t want anyone to know the extent of my attraction to women. *But not romantically*, I would say. Because to love a woman is much different than making out with her in a room full of cheering boys. (Which is to say, that is not the extent of my sexual history with women, but more to illustrate a point on why I had felt this way.) It seemed that the validation I sought in my attraction towards women could only be established or justified through the approval of men. And this isn’t surprising, considering how lesbian sex is portrayed in porn, “Sex is thus equated with attention from the male...” (Compulsory Heterosexuality, 63) By looking at the male-centric porn industry and how sex between men and women are portrayed, we have become conditioned to think of sex as an act of entertainment. So, when we see a woman having sex with women, the act in itself is for entertainment purposes rather than her physical enjoyment (how fascinating that the enactment of female pleasure is considered more gratifying than the actual orgasm). When I was 14, these images created an expectation for me that I felt compelled to adhere to, that I found myself attracted to because of the validation that came from the male

perception of the enactment of female pleasure. I was not conscious of it, but the representation of female pleasure was specifically situated in the male gaze, which caused me to consider my pleasure not my own.

After reading Rich's perspective on the power dynamics between men and women, I began to examine these gender codes more closely in my poetry. Last semester my poetry was very focused on women reluctantly in love with men through a lens of the male gaze that they are situated within. And I thought a lot about the expectations of women in hetero-relationships; their scripted dialogue with men. When dating men, my friend's advice is always to never text first. Which is so arbitrary. A lot of the advice given is to wait until men make a move. And I thought a lot about how I have had to pick up on the instinctive dialogue while dating women, how it had a lot more to do with intuition and reading body language rather than conforming to the script we are given with men, how it was a natural progression between friends finding a romantic intimacy and acting upon it,

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has, of course, included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. (Compulsory Heterosexuality, 52)

This quote made me think about how we come to have access to any knowledge of traditions. How long have my interactions with family, friends, and teachers taught me that my body is an ornament on display? How many times had I been asked in high school to go to the principal's office because my shoulders were showing, my cleavage was somewhat noticeable, and my shorts bared my mid-thigh, then told that it would be distracting for male students? How many times had my parents told me that "guys like it when..." or "Guys don't like it when you..."?

And that made me think about how much I hated this heteronormative script that everyone had felt compelled to conform to, what they had felt compelled to conform me to, what I for so long had felt compelled to conform to:

There was the inveterate romantic heterosexual fantasy, the mother telling the daughter how to attract men (my mother often used the word ‘fascinate’); the assumption that relations between the sexes could only be romantic, that it was in the women’s interest to cultivate ‘mystery’, conceal her actual feelings (Split at the Root, 103)

I find this to be a stark difference in the dating between women and men versus women and women, this expectation to “fascinate” the opposite sex without exposing too much of yourself. I wondered if men felt the same way, the need to “fascinate” women. Because the men I have encountered have never really fit the gender-coded construction of dialogue either, although they may have tried. I have found that when a man attempts to “fascinate” a woman in the hopes of pursuing her, he will boast about his accomplishments, his interests, while she compliments him on his accomplishments and interests without an expectation of her to divulge anything about herself. With women pursuing women, I have found that there is an equal amount of give and take during these sort of introductory conversations; they will ask you about your accomplishments and interests while then relaying what theirs are. It’s a more open conversation with the expectation of mutual respect. I have found that I have acquired this habit of code meshing when pursuing someone of the opposite sex, where I now expect mutual respect in these conversations. It surprises men when I raise my voice to cut them off once they have talked too much about their ideas and accomplishments and interests in order to talk about my own. Some may look at this as a form of man-hating, and while I hate the power dynamics that comes with dating men, I find I cannot repress my attraction to them. Rich says, “Another layer of the lie is the frequently encountered implication that women turn to women out of hatred for men.” (65) and while I find myself more at ease in relationships with women, this comes from a place of having a lack of codes and expectations to abide by. To abide by heterosexual codes and structures would mean I would forcibly be taking up a subservient role, a role I am not willing to participate in. Rich says,

I question the more or less psychoanalytic perspective...that the male need to control women sexually results from some primal male “fear of women” and of women’s sexual insatiability. It seems more probably that men really fear not that they will have women’s sexual appetites forced on them or that women want to smother and devour them, but that women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional—therefore economic—access to women only on women’s terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix. (Compulsory Heterosexuality, 43)

I am drawn to this quote for a couple reasons. The first being that there seems to be a compulsion from men to pin down a woman, but also an emotional/sexual need to have the attention of women on them. This imbalanced power dynamic has affected my desire towards men. While I still have a desire towards men, I find that there is a resentment towards that desire. I resent being attracted to the gender that upholds these heteronormative traditions, but I also want to understand how and why men feel compelled to do just that.

While I have constructed 21 love poems, they are not to be mistaken for mimicking the form and voice of Rich, but rather I am using her philosophy on honesty as a way to procure my experience as a bisexual woman. As for the poems themselves; some are love poems, yes, because I felt the need to emphasize how love comes to be rather than the establishment of it. The process of love is messy and it is especially unsalient at the beginning when you are trying to figure out what it is that is in front of the both (or multiples, depending) of you. Sometimes there is doubt, and I felt as though capturing that doubt is essential in the process of pursuing romantic interests; there is doubt in myself as someone who feels uncomfortable claiming the bisexual identity when there are so many who don’t see it as tangible, there is doubt in how to interpret the codes we enact and that are enacted upon us. And this can be said for both male-female/female-female relationships and I would be remiss to not include that. But I also wanted to try and capture the feelings associated with how I have come to learn these gender codes and expectations between both homo/hetero-relationships.

I tried framing my poems around my annotations, which looked something like this:

Compulsive to be hetero in my own bisexual identity, but preferences are fluid and subject to identity of romantic interest.

“Not all men” but be weary of all men as a way of protection—when you are subject to oppression/aggression how does that shape your desire for them and/or does that affect my desire towards women?

Gender coding within dating (examples: waiting for the man to take the lead and how that might affect a woman’s perception of their value) female/female relationships seem to naturally form bonds then proceed to take up roles fit for their relationship rather than conform to the prescribed dominant/submissive roles.

Compulsory—the feeling of adhering to gendered codes rather than own desires. Need for acceptance/validation from opposite sex.

Nobody tells you what loving a woman is like vs loving a man, how the attraction is different. For a long time I was in denial about my sexuality because I thought that I was supposed to seek validation from women in the same way I sought validation from men.

Performing normative: how do you learn about your identity when no information is available? Knowledge comes from interpersonal relationships and learning your own codes.

Basically the male gaze fucks with (all) social relationships.

Introduction: *With this companion piece to Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Tyler Tallmadge has developed a style of ~~rewrite~~ redress which amends potentially problematic or contestable wording while preserving a text as it was originally published. Rich frequently footnoted her own works of critical prose in subsequent publications, responding to her past selves and acknowledging the ways her perspective had changed since, often toward adopting a more nuanced view. In that spirit, the approach Tallmadge models here may be seen to productively foreground his perspective on Rich's texts while actively maintaining Rich's presence in the conversation he orchestrates. Representation and the mindful, close consideration of the quality of representation are evident in both Tallmadge's objects of inquiry and his process.*— Kristina King

~~Compulsory~~^{*} Normative [†]Heterosexuality and Gay Existence

Tyler Tallmadge

Foreword

In 1980, Adrienne Rich published her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." My first encounter with this essay left me enormously frustrated with Rich and her ~~portrayal of the lesbian existence within a society that functions with compulsory heterosexuality~~ [‡]*seemingly unwillingness to discuss the impact of compulsory heterosexuality on the gay (male) existence*[§]. ~~The issue that I drew with the essay was her complete disregard for the gay (male)~~

* Instances that are dashed out indicate places where I have revised and deleted my own original phrasing.

† Instances that are italicized indicate places where I have revised and added or clarified my own original phrasing.

‡ Rather than allow for it to seem like my issue was with Lesbianism I decided it would be more beneficial to clarify that my frustration was the lack of attention given to the Gay Male.

§ Here I attempt to clarify that, as mentioned in the first footnote, that my frustration is with the way gay men were left out of the narrative.

existence.^{*} Her arguments were rooted in the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality affected the lives of lesbians, *but she neglected to address how the same conditions affected lives of gay men similarly. Some of the ways she goes about exploring the ways compulsory heterosexuality is evident in the lives of women via the workplace. She examines the ways in which women have to perform their femininity in order to retain their jobs*[†]. Her largest argument was that heterosexuality is a political institution that allows for males to have access to women. *In the earliest stages of this foreword, I referred to this project as a rewrite of Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."* It was brought to my attention that this use of "rewrite" was indicative of an "erasure" of Rich, and subsequently, the lesbian existence. *In my very attempt to address what I was so upset by in Rich's work I was implying I would do the same to her. While my initial reaction to this comment from a peer was one of defense, I do see the value in what was being said. I now consider, as my peer suggested, my project to be a contemporary companion to Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" rather than a rewrite of it*[‡]. ~~In an effort to rewrite Rich's article from a contemporary standpoint, I went through a series of articles that discussed "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" and I was able to suspend a lot of the frustrations that I had in regard to Rich's article~~[§].

^{*} I'll admit that this is a rather "damned if you do, damned if you don't situation" Rich was in. She wasn't a gay man, so she really couldn't have written about them. What I would have liked was some kind of nod towards the fact that compulsory heterosexuality affected gay men as well. In this essay I attempt to give a nod to other groups who may be impacted by normative heterosexuality without speaking to their existence.

[†] Upon reflection I decided that this was unnecessary to address this in the foreword as gay men in the workplace isn't something I take up in the body of my work.

[‡] This addition was particularly important to me. I didn't want my work to be oppressive and ignorant towards the work that Rich had previously published, and I make a point to emphasize the thought process behind this.

[§] Here you can see the language I initially used in an attempt to explain my project. As you can likely see it, it was slightly erasing the work of Rich and that isn't something I wanted to do after reflecting on it.

I now understand ~~now the purpose of~~ Rich's essay as an attempt to explore the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality allows* for the violence against women ~~in a way that violence was being exerted over gay men~~[†]. More specifically, she ~~was~~ *seemed to be* writing about how compulsory heterosexuality allows for *heterosexual*[‡] men to be sexually violent towards women and ~~it could be explained~~ *allow for it to be explained away as* curative for their lesbian condition. The violence that gay men experience ~~was~~ *is typically*[§] not sexual in nature. Rather, that violence was induced by a fear or discomfort with gay men. My ~~rewriting of~~ *companion to* Rich's essay is an attempt to explore the reasoning behind the violence that gay men face and the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality allows for that violence. ~~In an effort to make my essay more inclusive and contemporary, I'll be using a critique of the concept of compulsory heterosexuality and aligning my discussions more with the terms that the article by Steven Seidman laid out.~~

Keeping in mind "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" was originally published in 1980, it's fair to say that some of the terminology and ideas expressed are slightly dated. That isn't a shot at Rich, it's just one of the facts of life. Down the line someone may pick this companion up and find fault with the ideas I express, it's just one of the things that happens. That said, the idea of "compulsory heterosexuality" is one that could be given contemporary attention. In his article "Critique of Compulsory Heterosexuality," Steven Seidman discusses the concept of compulsory heterosexuality at length. He isn't, however, using Rich's article as the primary source text for his work. Instead, he's focusing his attention on compulsory heterosexuality as a whole cultural phenomenon. He credits compulsory heterosexuality to "lesbian feminists and gay liberationists in the late 1960s and early 1970s" and attributes it to an attempt "to reveal a socially formed structural order of patterned sexual-gender divisions and

* You may not that this is a very small change, but it carries a large impacted. What originally read as "allowed" now reads as "allows." This is in attempt to highlight this violence hasn't ended – it's still a contemporary issue.

[†] Upon rereading this line, I found myself confused on what I even meant when I first wrote it. I recognize I was trying to articulate the difference in violence between lesbians and gay men, but the language I used was ineffective.

[‡] I felt it necessary to emphasize that it isn't just men...It's usually heterosexual men.

[§] Upon research I've come across disturbing stories of sexual violence perpetrated against gay men, so this addition was crucial for me to include.

hierarchies.” He goes on to argue that compulsory heterosexuality, in a contemporary setting, should be referred to as “normative heterosexuality.” He states that: “compulsory heterosexuality not only enforces the normative status of heterosexuality but also enforces a normative order within heterosexuality or established a standard of so-called heterosexuality.” It’s here that the issue is rooted in a contemporary mindset. We now recognize the existence of gender fluidity and the existence of more than the standard two *genders* (male & female). To be labeled heterosexual is to be given a label that enforces the assumption you are one of two genders (male or female) and you experience attraction to your other. Further, calling it compulsory mandates that it has to happen, if we instead call it normative it still enforces the same idea but now conveys it’s something that is considered “normal” rather than “compulsory.” It’s for this reason that throughout this essay, you will find that I’ve elected to refer to it as “normative heterosexuality” rather than “compulsory heterosexuality.”

Sincerely,
Tyler*

It’s 2019. Same-sex, commonly referred to as gay marriage, is legal in all 50 fifty states. In 28 of those states there are no explicit statewide laws at all protecting people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity in employment, housing, and public accommodations. My home state of Pennsylvania falls within this category. It’s hard to comprehend how we are in this weird in-between phase where it’s okay to embrace your sexuality but it still carries a threat. It’s important to emphasize that there is a literal threat that comes with being within the LGBT community. Violence against the LGBT community is still very much a contemporary issue. There are, of course, different types of violence that are exhibited. Statistics show that different types of violence are exhibited on the different groups that fall under the umbrella of the LBGT+ community. It would be cruel to try and situate any one group as worse off than another. My goal here isn’t to argue that gay men have experiences that are worse than the experiences of *the LBGT+ community* ~~lesbian women or someone who is~~

* This exists to highlight the fact that my foreword is over and everything that follows is the body of the work. It was practice I had seen Rich take up in her own work and I thought it would lend itself well here.

~~transgender~~^{*}. Rather, you would find that each group experiences varying *types* of violence. I would encourage that someone else, someone within the specific community, takes the reins (as I'm attempting to do here) and discuss the ways in which normative heterosexuality plays into the ways in which they are being violently oppressed, *which is something that I believe Rich to have been doing in her essay.*[†]

What is normative heterosexuality? It's the ideology that society is oriented around hierarchy of sexualities/gender identities. It's the force that is ever present in the world we live in that ensures that, for the most part, people act as what is expected of them. For example, men should be masculine, and women should be feminine. There should be little to no cross over here. Normative heterosexuality seems to exist to support the patriarchal society that we live in. Normative heterosexuality perpetuates the ideology that there is a "norm" of two genders: male and female. Gender, ~~of course,~~[‡] is something that is deeply encoded in us from a young age. Men are assigned the color blue, heroic action figures, and ~~rough housing~~[§] sports. Women are assigned the color pink, frilly dolls, and generally are encouraged to play sports (but, walk down any aisle and you'll find girls sports equipment has been given a feminine touch of pink). This is a very, very base level analysis of the ways in which gender is encoded into the ways in which we raise children.

What comes in the following paragraph is a comparison of two crimes; one was committed by a white male and the other was committed by a woman of color. This is in an attempt to highlight the ways in which the patriarchy is set up in such a way that it gives more slack to men. In the above paragraph I've posited that normative heterosexuality exists to support the patriarchal society we live in. I've already discussed one way in which gender is encoded in children, what I'm attempting to do below is highlight how injustices can occur due

* By focusing on lesbians and transgender individuals I found myself feeling as though I was ignoring the rest of the LGBT+ community, and that isn't something I want to do.

† Here I'm attempting to make it clear what aspects of Rich I'm trying to work with. It was previously mentioned that it was hard to trace Rich in this project.

‡ Here I was operating under the unfair assumption that everyone would recognize this as a truth, when in reality not everyone would.

§ I felt like I was creating an unnecessary binary here. Certainly, girls' sports can be "rough" so I felt it unnecessary to create this binary.

*to the patriarchal preference of men over women. I acknowledge that these are two very different crimes, but what I'm trying to instill in this essay is the knowledge of the ways that men benefit from the patriarchy which is supported by normative heterosexuality. It is my hope that through these examples you'll be able to better understand how men benefit from the patriarchy in order for you to then understand why gay men existing can pose a threat to it. **

If a boy does something wrong then you'll likely hear the adage "boys will be boys" whereas if a girl does something wrong, then you'll likely see a much harsher response. After all, if a girl comes to school wearing a tank top and a skirt then it's her fault if boys look at her and get distracted so she should just wear something else entirely rather than telling the boys to not look at girls like that[†]. On a more severe level of this analysis we can look at Brock Turner. In 2015 Turner sexually assaulted an unconscious 22-year-old woman. He was sentenced to six months' incarceration in jail with three years of probation. He was released three months early. His convictions carried a potential sentence of 14 years in prison to which Turner's father had the following to say in a letter: "That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life." Another case recently returned the public gaze in 2018 – that of Cyntoia Brown. In 2004, Brown was 16 and killed a 43-year-old man who had paid to have sex with her. Brown was the victim of sex-trafficking and her pimp "Kut-Throat" had sold her out to the man she killed. Fearing for her life during the encounter, Brown fatally shot the man. The 16-year-old Brown was originally sentenced to 51 years to life in prison. However, in 2019 Brown's sentence was commuted to 15 years (she's scheduled for release on August 7th, 2019). Arguing the different implications of murder versus rape would be an essay all its own, but this goes to show the ways in which we look at the crimes committed by men and women. The important take away is that Turner was a 19-year-old cisgender white male who committed a crime that had a potential 14 year prison sentence and was given 6 months (and served half of it) and that Brown was a 16-year-old woman of color who was tried as an adult and given a sentence of 51-years-to-life sentence that was later commuted to 15 years (only one year longer than the sentence that

* Upon receiving feedback, I realized that the connection I was trying to make between the patriarchy and Turner & Brown wasn't necessarily clear. This paragraph is my attempt to highlight that more specifically

[†] This is based off my own experiences with the dress code in my high school. However, a quick search shows that this is something that is still a problem in today's high schools

should have been given to Turner). Society is more inclined to side with men rather than women and one of the reasons is normative heterosexuality.

How does normative heterosexuality impact the “boys will be boys” *mentality that the patriarchy perpetuates*? *It’s rather simple. Let’s take it back to the example of dress codes mentioned earlier. The majority of the time, dress codes are geared in a way that affects girls the most. Most commonly you’ll see that girls aren’t allowed to show off their skin and if you ask administration about it, it generally is an issue that is linked to distracting boys. All †of the young straight boys in a school setting can’t control themselves if they even see so much of a hint of a shoulder or clavicle. But what about that young gay boy who is *forced thrust* ‡into the gym locker room? His very existence shows that boys don’t always have to be boys in so far as he can control himself. Being gay means you are attracted to the same sex and if you have a young gay student who is forced into a locker room while the very assumed objects of his desire are all around him in various stages of undress and showering then he’s showing he can control himself. If that boy can control himself in that setting, then straight boys should be able to control themselves around the sight of a female student who is wearing clothes. This very base level example can be applied to all stages of boy-into-manhood. The very existence of a man who can control himself around the thing that he desires/lusts after threatens the very existence of the “boys will be boys” mentality that the patriarchy thrives off of. Naturally, this makes the gay male existence a threat to the heterosexual male existence. It’s why, I believe, that there is this phenomenon of gay men experiencing physical violence.

* Again, I was working hard to make sure the connection between the patriarchy and normative heterosexuality. I was trying to show with the Brock Turner case how men benefit from a society that is inclined to side with men in order to highlight why men would try oppressing gay men.

† It was pointed out that my use of “all” implies a generalization of all boys. While this wasn’t my initial intention, upon reflection I’ve decided that I like it having this air of generalization as it ties well in the generalization of “boys will be boys” that I believe the patriarchy enforces.

‡ I received feedback the choice of “thrust” was pause-worthy and what I was trying to highlight here is that gay youth are forced into situations that may not be comfortable for them – like being in a locker room where they have to hide themselves further. I used “force” as a way to highlight more specifically that gay youth don’t have say in these situations.

In her 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” seems to be dealing with the ways in which her conception of compulsory heterosexuality (or normative heterosexuality) impacts women. What stuck out to me was the way in which she seemed to be dealing with the performance of womanhood and the violence that men exert over woman. I was particularly struck by the way in which she seems to be picturing the violence as more sexual in nature when it’s being exerted over women. Certainly, sexual violence against gay men is real and is out there, but I most commonly tend to think of violence against gay men as being more physical/verbal in nature. *This is based off my own experiences as a gay man as well as looking at news stories about other gay men.* Both forms of violence can be seen as “curative” meaning that the intent is get to the victim to be more aligned with what is expected because of normative heterosexuality. Through normative heterosexuality, women are expected to experience sexual attraction to men so through sexually violating women it can be seen as trying to “cure” a lesbian woman’s sexuality by showing them, essentially, what the hetero-male thinks they’re missing out on. This is not meant to suggest that this is what prompts all sexual assaults. Rather, this is just an attempt to articulate a reason as why this type of violence occurs to *lesbian women* in regard to normative heterosexuality. In the way that sexual violence can be seen as curative, physical violence against gay men can be seen as curative because it attempts to instill a fear into the victim, a fear against their own sexuality that would force them to align with heterosexuality rather than homosexuality. *Again, this is something I’m positing based off my own experiences. I was victim to severe bullying in high school that led to some sense of homophobia within myself mainly because I was the only “out” student and all of the hate I was receiving really left me with a sense of being on the outside that I could only attribute to my sexuality.** Why though, do heterosexual men seek to realign gay men to what society expects of men? *It comes back to the men because they are favored in the patriarchy. If there wasn’t the safety net of “boys will be boys” mentality, then hetero-men would likely face more backlash. They need all men to be aligned with “boys will be boys” for the claim to hold true.†* Lesbian women and gay men exist as outside of the normative heterosexual lens and as such they’re a threat to those who benefit

* This addition was made to back up a little more clearly why I was making the claims that I made.

† I was really trying to unite this piece a little more around this idea of the patriarchy being the reason normative heterosexuality exists and my example of Brock Turner needed repeated, I thought, to make it clearer.

from normative heterosexuality. As is common, when faced with a threat people tend to lash out and that is what I think is happening with violence against the LGBT community. Our very existence is going to force society to look at its beliefs and question why they exist.

Around the time that I sat down to draft this essay, I came across the story of Nigel Shelby. Nigel was a gay 15-year-old who took his own life after being bullied about his sexuality*. Nigel's mother has spoken out and emphasized that she doesn't want Nigel to be remembered as just another gay victim of bullying. In honoring her wishes, I'll be focusing on the comments made by other people rather than focusing on Nigel's death. A deputy in the county where the Shelby's lived posted this after hearing about Nigel: "Liberty / Guns/ Bible / Trump / BBQ. That's my kind of LGBTQ. I'm seriously offended that there is such a thing such as this movement. Society cannot and should not except this behavior. I have a right to be offended and will always be offended by this fake movement which requires no special attention but by person with an altered ego and fake agenda." †I don't intend to argue that this deputy's beliefs are the beliefs of the majority, but this is certainly a sentiment that I've personally seen online and heard in the past. Even his attempt to rewrite‡ the acronym of the LGBT+ community is indictive of the desire to enforce normative heterosexuality. It's hard to fathom that this sentiment is one that is being linked to someone in law enforcement. Afterall, if someone wanted to report violence against someone in the LGBT community and you get someone like this deputy who is so verbal in their disdain for the community, how can you expect the case to get treated like any other case? *This is deeply rooted in the fact that, as previously stated, 28 states do not have laws protecting people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. If you live in a state where you aren't protected, then it becomes even harder to get justice for crimes*

* To contextualize this, Nigel passed away on April 18, 2019. This was about a week before I started working on this project in depth.

† During the revision process it came to light that the deputy had, as of May 3rd, 2019 resigned from the sheriff's office.

‡ I gladly (and intentionally) use the word rewrite here because I think the idea of erasure that I've linked to rewriting applies well here.

committed against you because people are most likely more comfortable voicing their disdain because they have the backing of our patriarchal government. *

While I don't think Adrienne Rich and I would have gotten along based off our core beliefs, I do respect the work she did during her lifetime. I was initially taken with "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" because of my disdain for it, I was able to get over it and see it for the groundbreaking piece of literature that it is. It's my hope that she would see the value in my writing that I now see in hers. I have attempted to explore how the idea of normative heterosexuality allows for violence against the LGBT community in a way that is meant to try and cure anyone in the community of the very thing that pulls them outside of normative heterosexuality. I realize that the examples I provide focus on only a small portion of the community. That is intentional. I do not want to speak for a community I do not belong to, much like I think Rich didn't speak to gay men because they were not her community. It is my hope that this essay is read and allows for someone to question the place of violence and the ways it's used in relation to normative heterosexuality and the LGBT community.

Afterword

Throughout this essay you may have found it hard difficult to read due to the use italics and dashing out phrases. I wanted you to be able to see how some of the important changes in my thought process as this projected developed. Using just footnotes, I felt, wouldn't hold the same impact. If I had just erased all of the instances where my thoughts had shifted, I wouldn't have given the reader the chance to see the evolution in a way that footnoting alone couldn't have done. My footnoting process is something that was heavily inspired by Rich in her "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" where she had a similar process of footnoting her text. While I wasn't revisiting my text after as long of a time passing as Rich, I was still finding instances where my wording and ideas had shifted ever so slightly, and that is one of purposes of the footnotes. Really, the footnote process was twofold: it was intended to show the reasoning behind my revisions as well as being used to convey important information that I didn't feel would flow as nicely in the text (also, some of it is new information – like the

* Here again, I'm trying to tie everything back to this idea of the patriarchy as this omnipresence that allows for the existence of normative heterosexuality.

update on the deputy from Nigel Shelby story). You'll likely notice there are virtually no dashed-out sections after the foreword... That is because the foreword was written and revised before I wrote the body of this work. After going through and addressing the issues with the language I had in the foreword, I was better able to gear the body of this work towards that mindset which allowed for less instances of things needing cut and more instances of clarification.

I'd like to think that through this process I've gotten to a place where I'm more inclined an empathic reading of Adrienne Rich's work. I do see more value in her now than I originally did at the start of the semester. While I still find fault in her work, I recognize that somewhere down the line someone may read this piece and find fault with the topics I'm discussing (and I hope they get to the same place of empathy for me). Overall, I think that this project has been good for me. It gave me a chance to write about something that I'm passionate about while formatting it to the style that I found intriguing in Rich's work.

*All the best,
Tyler*

Introduction: *In the text that follows, “In Address to My Interior” by Stephen Krichels, we see Adrienne Rich’s *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* being used as a lens to analyze the politics of friendships. Krichels’s juxtaposes Rich’s opinions on the male honor system to the ideologies present in Jack Donovan’s text *The Way of Men*. At its core, “Friendship is Politics” is a text that uses Rich’s discussion of the politics of friendship and Donovan’s hierarchy to analyze the roles that men take up in their homorelational friendships. Similar to my text, Krichels’s and I are both using Rich not as the primary focus of our analysis, rather we’ve engaging with her as a bouncing point into our differing analyses of men.—Tyler Tallmadge*

In Address To My Interior

Stephen Thomas N. Krichels

To my friends, who honored our bond even when I’d forgotten it myself.

Introductions:

Adrienne Rich, writing *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, says that, “The politics worth having, the relationships worth having, demand that we delve still deeper” (Rich, *On Lies Secrets, and Silence*, 193).

So, my friends, I’ll start that dive by discussing the politics. Rich, in this same text, says, “Truthfulness, honor, is not something which springs ablaze of itself; it has to be created between people. This is true in political situations. The quality and depth of politics evolving from a group depends in very large part on their understanding of honor,” (*On Lies Secrets, and Silence*, 193), but this only address the “Quality and extent” of politics, not their correlation to relationships, to friendships. For that we first must look to her poetry, in which she writes,

The moment when a feeling enters

The body

Is political. This touch is political (Rich, “The Blue Ghazals”)

This claim, though explicit, remains imprecise for the purposes of my address to you though, my friends. It is not enough for us to call all feeling political, or rather, it is instead too much. How can I relate to you the whole of my feelings when often I don’t understand them myself? We must be craftier than this, we must be more precise so as to give us a medium through which I may relay to you the intricacies of my mind. For this, we look now away from rich—not too far—to another writer of the late twentieth century feminist movement, Carol Hanisch. Hanisch writes in the forward to her essay “The Personal is Political”, “Also, “political” was used here in the broad sense of the word as having to do with power relationships, not the narrow sense of electoral politics,”(Hanisch, “The personal is Political”), and for my purposes, *our* purposes, this is fitting.

Lies:

Some of you, friends, may question how power has entered our relationships. Surely, we are all of us equals, no one above the other. As it should be, shouldn’t it? We have deceived ourselves with these notions. This is not to say that our friendships, my relations to-and-with you all are invalid. As Rich says, those politics and relations worth having demand investigation, and in holding with this, they *are* worth having.

To begin with a question, what is the quality of our politics, our power dynamics and hierarchy? It seems this is the place to begin the conversation of our friendship. Rich claims that this quality depends on our understanding of Honor, so how do we understand it? How do we *display* our understanding of it?

Working backwards, starting with the smallest question and finding out that it’s bigger on the inside, let’s all of us examine ourselves through Rich’s lens. “An honorable human relationship—that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word ‘love’—is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other,”(Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 188), you see how simple this should be. I love you! There, we are honorable, we are “refined,” or perhaps not, perhaps I

don't have the right to say this to you all. Not yet. My truth to you all, the one that must be refined before I may make that proclamation of love to you all who so deserve it, is that I am a liar. "Lying is done with words, and also with silence,"(Rich, *On Lies Secrets, and Silence*, 188), and it is with my silence that I have lied to you, and it is in this writing which I will break that silence in a clumsy effort to refine the truth. I have revealed parts of the truth, and left other parts silent, in that calculated way that knows every best lie sprouts from a seed of truth. My lie grounds itself in your meaning to me, a meaning that I don't expect to be reciprocated, a meaning which lays the foundational premise of our power-dynamic in skewed fashion.

You saved my life. Better put, you save my life. At a point in my adolescence when I found little reason to continue, a point at which I'd lost faith in my family, you all were moments of distraction, comfort, even happiness. Though I had not met some of you yet, and wouldn't for years from that point, I credit you here too, because that feeling, or lack of it, that inhabited me for that segment of my life has never wholly left. Rich puts words to it, explaining that which lurks on the edge of my consciousness, and though she does so explicitly for the experience of women, it feels accurate to apply it here too, "The liar is afraid....The liar fears the void...[the void] is not mere hollowness and anarchy. But in women it has been identified with lovelessness, barrenness, sterility,"(Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 190). One or two of you once credited me with being brave, more of you have credited me with being foolish, and all of you have heard me explain both away by naming myself a masochist at some juncture of our friendship, but this is another lie. "Lies are usually an attempt to make everything simpler—for the liar—than it really is, or ought to be,"(Rich, *On Lies Secrets, and Silence*, 188), and as such I lied to you, because better to offer that half-truth than to explain there is no threat, no pain, no consequence that compares to that void. Unfortunately, I know well that some of you have also had to face this void, this "dark core," but for those who haven't I will do my best to explain in brief. "Lovelessness" as a phrase encapsulates two states of being: the state in which one is unloved, and the state in which one has no love. It is the second of these states which weighs most heavily on a soul. Barrenness is a word more rife with meaning, but when applied to emotion comes closest to finding its mark here. Sterility is trickier for men, though I cannot speak for women, but makes its place in my void by creating the sense that I have nothing to offer, that I was incapable of offering happiness and beauty to others.

Foundation:

That is too much on the void, though, as it is not the focus here. No the focus is politics. Hierarchy, in many ways, makes up the fundamental elements of our friendship, and this base level, as I mentioned, is skewed. This is where I depart from Rich's perception of honor somewhat, for Rich notes, "Male honor also having something to do with killing...Male honor as something needing to be avenged; hence, the duel,"(Rich, *On Lies Secrets, and Silence*, 186), and this seems a narrow interpretation. I would instead posit that male honor has traditionally had something to do with repayment of debt. In the instance of dueling, which Rich ascribes to this honor killing, the repayment is for a wrongdoing. Eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth, a balancing of scales. However, there are other forms of repayment, and it is here which the foundational asymmetry is found, for how does one repay their friends for reminding them that life is worth living, for saving them from the void, when one is still in the grip of the sterility that comes with that void? My friends, you have me at a disadvantage.

However, there are other fundamentals to consider in our foundation. For this I bring in another voice to our discussion. Jack Donovan is the writer of a book that was given to me by an older acquaintance on the cusp of my adulthood, ostensibly in the hopes that it would give me the same understanding that it brought the giver. In some respects, it did. The book's title is *The Way of Men*, and its contents are the results of Donovan's search for what it means to be a man. Again though, as Rich wrote for women and I find it adaptable to our conversation, Donovan's conversation may be similarly ungendered in places.

In pursuit of his question Donovan examines human groups in their basest setting, their fight for survival, and given the right circumstances that setting is still relevant today. Donovan broaches the subject that, "Because your group is struggling to survive, every choice matters. If you give the wrong person the wrong job, that person could die, you could die, another person could die, or you could all die,"(Donovan, *The Way of Men*.), in less extremist terms Donovan is discussing group structure. We've all witnessed it, though the tropes have changed with time and instance: Jocks, the "Cool Kids," Nerds, the class clown, Alphas, Betas, the brains, the brawn, the mediator, healers, and these are just those roles I've heard ascribed which I can remember off the top of my head. The point remains the same, we all fill roles, sometimes different roles in different groups, circles, or cohorts, sometimes multiple roles.

I have one consistent role with all of you, however, and that role is in keeping with Donovan's example: protector. For all of you have at some point painted me in this light. In the pursuit of understanding my relation to you, of diving deeper, and of honoring our relations, I offer this up for scrutiny. What drives me to this role, what orients our politics so that it is my safety willingly—and it is willing, do not mistake this as an appeal for change—being endangered for the preservation of yours?

If we believe Donovan, this is an innate result of the natural state of man. Something about me marks me as suitable for this role. If this were not an attempt at honor I would write it off as my physicality, but that would be another simplification. I am physical, but so are some amongst you, and physicality does not, alone, create a discrepancy in the value of our safety. More so, my physicality would not guarantee my willingness to do so. Left to my own devices, I would rather run than fight. My instinct for self preservation is keen, so why not I run and save myself? One of you once told me that you wouldn't fault me for doing so when we were followed in the dark by coyotes. And yet, that is one of you, while others of you have requested my protection from more human dangers: from barroom creeps, to stalkers. So on some level, for many of you that expectation that I will take on this role is there, tacit or explicit.

Maybe the reason our dynamic is this way is the same reason that our foundation is off kilter to begin with. I feel that I owe you, that you have saved me and therefore my honor demands the scale be leveled, and in doing so unlevels this aspect of our politics. This does not account for your assumption though, merely my willingness.

My friends, I do not doubt your capability, for I am selective in my friendship and believe you all to be intelligent and capable individuals. The void, *my* void is kept at bay best by your collective presence, and I would not risk your being in my life because doing so is risking the voids encroachment. So you see the truth beyond another lie. I might be brave or foolish who's to say, but whichever is true, I am also selfish, because your well being is my well being, because you save me and that un-balances the scales. I don't say this in an attempt to simplify, I'm doing my best to avoid such habitual tendencies. No, I say this to expand the possibilities of this investigation, to dive deep. Returning to Rich momentarily, "There is no 'the truth,' 'a truth'—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity," (Rich, *On Lies Secrets, and Silence*, 188), so you see, I am "increasing complexity" here, or, at the very least, attempting to do so

So the reason must be none of these, or maybe some combination of them. We begin even now, so early in our conversation, how intricate friendship—politics—is beneath the surface. Let us press forward, though, for whatever the reason or reasons, we find that I am in this role. What does that mean though, that I am willing to risk myself for you, that I would prefer to risk myself for you rather than allowing for you to risk yourselves, you are my friends after all.

Hierarchy:

We've arrived at the meat of the conversation, the real substance. Are we equal? Are our friendships, relationships, *politics* level? Even a faulty foundation may be mended, after all. Are they unlevel? If I endanger myself for you, does that mean that I'm worth less, subservient, inferior? Police officers protect civilians and are deemed "public servants," does that not indicate that the role of protector is inherently lower than the role of protected?

The converse of this is what Donovan refers to as the "Tactical Virtues," as Donovan writes it, "When men evaluate each other as men, they still look for the same virtues that they'd need to keep the perimeter" (Donovan, *The Way of Men*, 15). These virtues, according to Donovan, are: strength, courage, mastery, and honor. We have already discussed these to some indirect extent. You, dear friends, know my virtues as well as anyone living. You know my vices too. We know from the conversation above that I am the perimeter of "*us*" as Donovan would say it. While we collectively live within society, and are therefore sheltered to some extent, we still exist as our own clique, and it is on that perimeter which I reside. This returns, again, to Rich, to her assertion that male honor has something to do with killing. The perimeter is where killing happens, the capability to perform this honorable killing aligns with Donovan's "tactical virtues." If Donovan is right, then, it would seem Rich is right, and *vice versa*. So if they are right, if I am being honest, if we are honoring our politics, if all of these things, then does that mean that the dynamic is reversed, that I take my place the higher?

Maybe. Maybe that would be so if life and death were all that concerned us, but it isn't. We are human, we have other needs, other desires, other *values* than what makes us good at defending on another. Even Donovan admits this when addressing the "guardians" which man the perimeter, saying, "...if you fail at your jobs there can be no human happiness, no family life,

no storytelling, no art or music” (Donovan, *The Way of Men*, 14). In doing so, Donovan gives us the words to start our dive into the other components of our hierarchy. “Human happiness,” and every thing that means to us. There is more to us, even me, than to staving off the void. The void does not press so close to everyone’s perimeter as it does to my own(I can only assume, but it feels a safe assumption), but even for those who the void clings to even more fiercely, there are other interests. Music, stories, families, are just a start. There are roles other than protector-guardian-perimeter, they must be filled. These roles cannot be lesser than that of the guardian, if they were, then there would be no point to the guardians. Those who man the perimeter protect the interior from the physical, those who man the interior protect the entirety from the void. One cannot be without the other, logically speaking.

If I am your perimeter, that necessarily makes you all my interior. You create the music in my life, you tell me stories, you *are* my family. If you know me well, as those of you to whom this is in address do, you know that to me, blood is not family, genetics is not family; family is chosen. I do share blood with some of my family, and by virtue of nucleic proximity in my young life those people who I share genes with were given greater opportunity to find their way into my family, but it is those of you without this advantage that I consider myself most bonded to. It is you for whom, with whom, I explore these politics. It is with you that I *do* consider our hierarchy to be level, our foundations firm. You, my family.

Consequence:

A level hierarchy does not mean the end of our delving. We have established only the summation of our political scale, but only spoken *around* the weights balancing each side. What I mean, my friends, is we have not discussed the implications of our roles. Equal is not equivalent, no always, not here. Our roles have played a part in making us who we are. At times, they self-perpetuate, at others the cause us to reevaluate who, what, we have become. I am limited here, to speak from my own experience, my own understanding and observations of your experience, so outside of myself I can only speculate, and as speculation feels too akin to simplification, I’ll do my best to avoid both in this next part of our conversation.

On the subject of self-perpetuation, and in the interest of coming clean about one more lie: my aforementioned physicality. It is grounded in more than the pathological need for the

endorphins exercising releases in my brain, though that is truer than the most of you are even aware. Nor is it *simply* that I have insecurities regarding my image, though that is true as well. All the best lies have some truth to them, after all. No, the truth in the context of this conversation, is far more sensible: I know what it feels like to be hopelessly outmatched. I had never given this subject much thought, or credited it with being special in any way, having assumed everyone experience the feeling at one point or another. One of you, friends, made me aware of my wrong assumption a few months prior to this conversation. We'd been wrestling, all in good play, and because I'm competitive, because it was amusing, because we were laughing, for so many innocent reasons, I made a point of locking you down. At the time, I thought no more of it, but weeks later you told me it was the first time you realized that there was really nothing you could do to get free, that you just weren't strong enough. That feeling, for me, goes deeper. On my own, responsible for nobody else, the worst things a threat can do is hurt me, and as I've mentioned, physical pain is not the void. It's different now, that I'm older, more aware, and particularly now that I feel that it's my function to defend you. To be weak now, to be overpowered without recourse, is a threat not just to my own well-being, but to yours as well.

I am not superhuman, I'm not an olympic athlete, and I never will be. In short, I'm not infallible, as is true for everyone. However, when I fail, as all do, perhaps it will help keep the void at bay somewhat to be able to say it was not through unpreparedness, or sloth that it occurred. It is for similar reasons, that my discomfort with crowds came into being, as there are too many people outside of *us* for me to keep track of. You see my friends how this "role apart," as Donovan puts it, has insinuated itself into my being, how *our politics* becomes *my personal*, but also *our personal*.

Closing:

It isn't that to have an honorable relationship with you, I have to understand everything, or tell you everything at once, or that I can know, beforehand, everything I need to tell you.

It means that most of the time I am eager, longing for the possibility of telling you. That these possibilities may seem frightening, but not destructive, to me. That I feel

strong enough to hear your tentative and groping words. That we both know we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us.

The possibility of life between us. (Rich, On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, 194)

I have no more eloquent words that these already laid down by Rich to describe my purpose here. I have, for so long, thought on my place in *us*, of my place in opposition to *them*, whoever *they* are. It was not until now that I had the capacity to begin to “delve” into this subject which lies so close to the heart of who I am, and even know I feel I do us all a discourtesy with the brevity of my thoughts and the limitations of my scope. In address to this I urge you not to think on this as a completed conversation, but rather the very beginnings of *us*, a point at which we may hitherto launch any inquisition. To close this down now would be no better than to *simplify*, after all, as you have heard my conversation, but I have not yet heard yours in explicit form. “Frightening but not destructive” are comforting words to me, to someone who lives in fear of the void, but with you, my friends, a barrier between it and myself even should all other bastion elude me.

I cannot say that I will never be a liar, that those instincts will vanish, because the truth makes us vulnerable, and the perimeter is difficult to vacate once one takes their place there, but I do hope to also have other roles with you, in the interior. A liar, perhaps, surrounded by people, but not alone as Rich would claim.

Once more I will say, do not think to change the nature of my role in our group, do not think first but of your own well being, and your own, smaller, perimeters of which I am not a part. I do not address you here seeking change, but rather a right, as mentioned. The simple right to say: “I love you.”

I love you. My friends, my family, those of you who are my perimeter from the void inside me. You can do me no greater favor than existing as yourselves, within my interior, and allowing, at least for a time, me to forget, to feel myself, or maybe even feel as someone else.

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Introduction: *Though prose and dialogue Conte gives voice to Adrienne Rich's poetry in a fashion that reveals the truth of how poetry speaks: not in its entirety, but by individual lines. It is in this way that Conte draws both audience and authors alike into his own conversation examining how our cultural perception of friendship affects and contrasts with his own relationships. The resulting document defies simple genrefication, and demonstrates through exquisite introspection a take on friendship that is discomfoting in ways that should make us all grateful to have read it. If you have ever thought to yourself about what is or is not appropriate as a means to convey to your friends the depth of your feelings, you will likely see that struggle reflected in Conte's experiences, in his conversation with Rich, and in his prose.*

Vague descriptions of content, attempting to entice without revealing, can never do this piece justice, so instead of continuing with such, I will tell you its emotion, its near physical weight. Conte's piece, Martin's piece, will carry to you the pangs of longing for what could be, the tacit agony of what can't be, and the frustration that is born of feelings that can never be adequately communicated to those that most deserve it. If you do have not asked yourself, "Why do we treat ourselves this way, why do we treat each other this way?" you will after "Reading Friendship."— Stephen Thomas N. Krichels

Reading Friendship

Martin Conte

The Cast:

Adrienne Rich, *she the Muse, she the text not the person, she just out of my reach always breaching my thoughts*

Audre Lorde *she who tells us we have a right to feel*

Michel de Montaigne *he who asks everything of the friend*

Jacques Derrida *he who wonders what the friend might be*
 Maxine Kumin&Anne Sexton *they whose friendship laughed poetry into breath*
 Rachel Carson&Dorothy Freeman *they who recognized each other in their aching language*
 Matt Hart *he who told me friendship could be spoken of*
 James Still *he who looked to his own hills, their solitude his friendship*
 Will *he who knew me when my body was barely ready to stand, who reminds me to play*
 Lily *she who reminds us all that we can and must tell of our love constantly, reassuringly*
 Ramsay *she whose friendship I am in love with*
 Dan *he who stays up late to speak our friendship into fruit*
 Vita *she who knows me in sound*
 Meg *she who I know in sight*
 Georgia *she who I dream of writing to*
 Lukas *he who I kissed and know not much more of*

Much scholarly writing seems oriented to lending the scholar's voice to the conversation surrounding source material. But this seems contrary to the very reason I read: to find ways for the material to impact my life, to find a new way to inhabit the space I occupy by looking through the lens of the material. There is “a language/ I know to be English but cannot understand,/ telling me it's in 'transformational grammar'/ and that the student who typed the letter/ does not understand this grammar either.”* That which I feel from reading Rich does not settle well in the scholar's language. What other language might I use? How can I write an essay that both reflects this personal engagement with the material, while simultaneously being useful to another reader?

Are all these essays about friendship really love letters to friends? This is a difficult question for me. I did this: type three words-delete, stand up, try again, look at Rich's fat book, look away. Is it so hard because “I suppose there never will be time/to speak of more than this,”† that to voice

*“Contradictions: Tracking Poems, 14,” (648). *Unless otherwise noted, all poems and page numbers are sourced from Collected Poems 1950-2012*, Adrienne Rich, W.W Norton & Company, 2016.

† “Sunday Evening” (33).

love in this way is to break some social code that says we shouldn't write love letters to friends, that "friendship does not keep silence, it is preserved by silence."^{*} Why this silence? Why the heart pounding and scarlet face when I text a friend to voice seriously my affection? Is it because "I may without perjury make known to him who is not another—he is myself?"[†] If the friend is me and I them, is a love letter to a friend a practice in vanity? When Will saw my typewriter, he told me to leave the room. When I returned, there was a folded paper on my desk, which he told me to read later (why later?): "I do very much hope that we leave this world roughly around the same time as I can't possibly imagine existing here on earth without you." I carry this letter every day. "Your letter// blinds me."[‡] Why must we leave before this love is articulated? Why might this love blind us?

"Remember those months in the studio together" Paula Becker asks Clara Westhof.[§] The art was the space at which these friends found their intimacy, the intimacy which allows her to also say "I feel so full/ of work, the life I see ahead, and love/ for you, who of all people/ however badly I say this/ will hear all I say and cannot say."^{**} That tremendous line break, when that love could be for anything, for those husbands brought up earlier, for the art, for the artists before her. But no, the love is for *you*, for the friend, for the one who makes beside her, no matter where. Monday nights through Summer, we play music, cacophonous dance tunes of the steelband. Vita sets up ahead and to the left of me, our bare feet familiar with our spots on the tar of the park's parking lot. I am as familiar with the instrument before me as I am with the image of Vita before me, before her own instrument. What else holds this bond? What else keeps our joy in each other, as Vita and I drift and vaguely associate on any other night. We play the music, those old tunes together, and the love of it is not just the music, but the love of that work *beside* the other. In other places, I will play these songs with other figures standing before me, without Vita before me, and the music will tremble with its lack. "Clara, why don't I dream of you?/ That photo of the two of us—I have it still,/ you and I looking hard into each other/ and my

^{*} Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*, Verso Books, 1972, 53.

[†] Montaigne, Michel De. *Of Friendship*, 1580.

[‡] "Your Letter" (325).

[§] "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff" (482).

^{**} *ibid*, (483).

painting behind us.”* The music lets Vita and I see each other, hard, at work, this unique familiarity stemming from the old complexities of sounds that reside in the muscle memory of our hands. It is as if Vita lives in that muscle memory, too, for there we are, looking hard at each other, *and my painting behind us*, the frame in which we reside, for Clara and Paula the frame of a painting, for us the echoes of the band.

*But I forgot to tell you the setting: the coast, or “the scarred volcanic rock,”† or the bed, or the insides of a poem, or the outsides after a poem, or the well-known path up the mountain, or “driving with you in spring road/like a streambed unwinding downhill,”‡ or in the water, or beside the water with the fire, with you, or “down borderless streams.”§ Where will the friends find one another? “The road’s a frayed ribbon strung through dunes.”** I write “Sam shows us /how sky has moved /since we sat./Constellations shape between/point of his finger/dimple of his chin./Lily lays her head/in my /hands. Where/does laughter live, before shared?/We all dig bare toes/into sand.” *Between the skies and the sand, the friend lives. On this stage, this page, Rich and I meet* “standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean... in a room where too much has happened for you to bear... by the light/of the television screen.”†† *I meet my friends, by now many hundreds of times, at the feet of the mountain. We climb, and I offer a poem to accompany us, James Still low boil coming out from my years old rote: I shall not leave these prisoning hills...”‡‡ I find the friend in the prisoning hills. I find Rich at the feet of the mountain, in the gait of the friend. Rachel Carson writes to Dorothy Freeman “all the loveliness of Southport is so bound up with thoughts of you and memories of al we have shared”§§ I find the friends in the**

* “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” (483).

† “Incipience,” (363).

‡ “The Spirit Of Place,” (552).

§ “An Atlas of the Difficult World V,” (716).

** “Endpapers i,” (1118).

†† “An Atlas of the Difficult World, XIII (Dedications),” (727-28).

‡‡ Still, James. “Heritage,” first published in *New Republic* 85, no. 1098 (18 Dec. 1935): 170.

§§ Carson, Rachel and Dorothy Freeman. *Always, Rachel: the Letters of Rachel Carson and DORothy Freeman, 1952-1964*, edited by Martha Freeman, Beacon Press, 1995, 120.

*place. The place becomes the friend. I find the friend in the pages, the words leaving pages, in the space between the sounds of poems we share together. "This is the place./And I am here."**

I don't want to do a Queer reading of Rich, or a Queer reading of friendship. I don't want to look at the intimacies and erotics of profound friendship and exclaim "look! Latent homosexuality! These two men clearly were lovers, look at this love!" Are we so unable to conceive of a love separated from sexuality? And yet, how do I not do a Queer reading? How do I be Queer, and not read queer? How do I read Rich, and not read her queer? I have simplified too much: I have simplified reading Queerness in order to reject this act. I have simplified friendship in a way that defies its natural Queerness. If we poke into the not so well lit corners of Queerness, we see it includes all that which refuses to fall into neat social categorizations. What friendship, then, isn't Queer? Our media and culture has shelves and shelves of categorical depictions of romance, but friendship in all contexts seem to defy these categories. "We must at last renounce that ultimate blue/ and take a walk in other kinds of weather./ The sourest apple makes its wry announcement/ that imperfection has a certain tang."[†] That ultimate blue expects all around it to conform to its color, to be satisfied in its monochromaticity. It is easy to fall into that blue when we fall in love, to base our movements, our utterances, our self-professed traditions, on the traditions of the ultimate blue, for we learn romance by seeing romance, by reading romance, by hearing romance. But does friendship come from the same place? Do we learn friendship in the same way? Or do we learn it, not by model, but from itself, each friendship an exercise in learning friendship? "We know each other, crack and flaw,/ like two irregular stones that fit together."[‡] Irregularity seems a necessary component of the friendship. I met Lily our freshman year in high school, when she joined the steelband, and through mutual friends. For the first three months, we communicated (without exaggeration) solely in insults: *Just shut up. No one wants you here. Put on a tie. I could smell you from the other side of the room.* These insults elicited untethered hilarity between us, and from there, we found the way our irregularities fit together. This was how I learned Lily's friendship, not through a model beyond us, but through the model which

* "Diving Into the Wreck," (373).

† "Stepping Backward," (24).

‡ *ibid*, (25).

rose between us, *from* us. Is this not Queer? Now, Lily uses the word “organic” to describe our friendship, and I see what this means: rising from itself. Is this Queerness? To allow something to source itself in itself, and not in what society suggests or demands or polices or politics that it is? “The friend lives half in the grass and half in the chocolate cake.”* I can find no more fitting understanding of friendship, these terms disparate from each other and disparate from us, acknowledging that in friendship there is always this certain tang.

Why are we so frightened when the erotic comes to us in our friendships? Audre Lorde writes “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”† Can I name all the erotic events I have shared among these friends? Just yesterday, opening the gardens in Castine, misty wind rolling around us. I share these gardens humbly with two women, both in their late middle age, knowledge pouring through the way their fingers work the soil. I am untethered by this sense of the erotic, this shared sense of being bowled over in our senses, of our bodies and each others' bodies. Why do we step away, why do we leave this state unnamed? “When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us.”‡ Is there a way to name the erotic among us, without trespassing this society's expectation that it be “relegated to the bedroom?”§ Can Rich's “common language” exist without this erotic rhetoric? Rich's poem, any of them, it's nature on the page, is so inextricably linked to the erotic, to this simmering sensuality that is possible in the arrangement of sound: “Sometimes I dream we are floating on water/hand-in-hand; and sinking without terror.”** This comes in the last couplet of a Ghazal, which traditionally turned to a poet's self-address, a naming of their self. Instead, Rich turns to us, to our hands together, our bodies enveloped in water, in sound. *Physical*. In my muscle memory, I know my friends in the

* Hart, Matt. “The Friend,” first published in *Poetry*, October 2015.

† Lorde, Audre. “The Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power,” from *Sister Outsider*, Ten Speed Press, 1984.

‡ *ibid.*

§ *ibid.*

** “The Blue Ghazals 5/4/69,” (312).

ways Ramsay holds hands, the way Sam and I lean shoulder to shoulder, or Tori and I forehead to forehead, the way we sleep entangled, the way Ruby likes my hand on her neck when we hug, or the long lingering hug Molly and I find, or the twisting turvy “awkward hug” always improvised between me and Will. *Emotional*. Will introduces me to his girlfriend Lindsey. Quickly, we become friends. A few months later, at a dinner together, Lindsey and I find a quiet moment to rest heads together. I find a surge of love *so particular* for Lindsey in that we both share a love for Will. Our own love, certainly, but a love made all the richer by loving the same other. *Psychic*. Dan puts his hand to his chin, turns to the window, and I know he wants to leave, it's time to go. Mia raises an eyebrow and I hear *I'm trying not to laugh at this right now*. Ramsay says something that can only be translated into text as “fgjhdbjhdweaaaaa” and I hear *how many ways left in language are there to say I love you*. Fiona says “yes” but her eyes widen and I know she means *I am frustrated with the way things are going right now*. Kristina bears her face to all, and tells me my acknowledgment of the lively language of her expressions made her feel like “I had an ally in the room.” How we know each other in ways our language can't betray. Is this knowing not an erotic knowledge? *Intellectual*. Can we all articulate that the time we share finding Rich is a way of knowing erotically, a shared erotic understanding of Rich? In the writing workshop, we dare both to write and we dare both to respond. I flush at the hard questions posed of me by my peers. Why can't this be an erotic understanding among us?

Dialogue:

The friend interrogates. The friend doesn't leave silent, the friend expresses the anger they feel and the love they feel, for to not express it is to decide the friend cannot be expressed to. Rich expresses these hard truths, interrogating me when I might most need it.

Rich: Ask me something.

Me: What does friendship look like?

Rich: two handsome women, gripped in argument,/ each proud, acute, subtle

Me: This is the way to be the friend, isn't it? To argue. To know it will hurt.

Rich: You're what the autumn knew would happen... once the last absolutes were torn to pieces/ you could begin

Me: Begin what? What am I to do?

Rich: Nothing can be done/ but by inches

Me: And yet, how impatient I am!

Rich: he knows, or thinks he knows, what you secretly wanted

Me: I assume we share the same goals, before those goals might be formed by your words.

Rich: when I try to speak/ my throat is cut

Me: I don't know how to sew it together again.

Rich: Silence can be a plan... Do not confuse it/ with any kind of absence

Me: What happens in silence?

Rich: we have to pull back from the incantations,/rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly/ and disentrall ourselves, bestow/ ourselves to silence

Me: Is my silence different than yours? Can my silence encourage another's voice?

Rich: I am thinking this in a country/ where words are stolen out of mouths

Me: Speaking, then, is not just my action, but by nature an act of silencing others?

Rich: words are found responsible/all you can do is choose them... Or, you never had a choice... and this is verbal privilege

Me: When I remain silent, what can you say?

Rich: O you who love clear edges/ more than anything watch the edges that blur

Me: Why do I struggle to ask these sorts of questions of my other friends, Rich?

Rich: Because this world gives no room/ to be what we dream of being.*

Ah, Rich! Why have you hidden your letters from us? Are those friendships hidden things?

Which Rich are we allowed to see? "I read your letters long ago/ in that half-defunct/ hotel in Magdalen Street/ every word primed my nerves."[†] Rachel Carson writes to Dorothy Freeman

almost weekly, sometimes nightly, "Darling Dorothy... as I told you, you were always with me when I wakened in the night— and always the sense of your presence, and of your sweet

* "Mother-in-Law," (546); "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," (118) "November 1968," (299) "Incipience 1."(362) "Rape," (392) "Meditations for a Savage Child, III," (403) "Cartographies of Silence 3," (457) "Transcendental Etude" (513) "North American Time VII," (597) "North American Time IV," (596) "Contradictions: Tracking Poems 29," (656) "Pieces 3. *Memory*," (322).

[†] "A Marriage in the 'Sixties," (138).

tenderness, and love was very real to me.”* What does the letter I offer my friend or they to me give us? Fiona writes to me “My heart calls to yours from afar, dear one,” I write to Nicole “you are valued... your humanity qualifies as being valued,” Georgia writes to me “I love you for treating each of my tears like a treasure and its own world instead of ever a waste,” I write to Ramsay “you make me a better thinker and citizen,” and the drawings in margins of stick figures us, of moose and whale, of potential replacements for the Maine flag, of hearts and devils, Lucia writes “the Zumba teacher was 'you.' The same beard... I was so sad afterwards because it reminded me of you,” Kristina says of becoming friends, “this feeling of, I don't know, I can only describe it as gravity... or magic... I enjoy being surprised, and I find you very surprising, in a way that makes me feel excited.” Molly writes “I can't see moose without thinking of you,” and Meg, in so many small notes, penned on cloth and wood and cardboard and petals and food, “I love you.”

Being able to watch the friend at work is a beautiful thing. “your woman's hands turning the wheel or working with shears,/ torque wrench, knives with salt pork, onions, ink/ and fire.”† There can be many conversations and many claims about those things we have passion for, but to watch the friend enact a passion, particularly a passion beyond our own reach, is a deep emblem of the beauty of friendship. Meg designs sets, and as she carves the miniature desks and doors from cardstock and cardboard, paints their details with a delicate brush, and constructs the little black box model, she explains how the way a world looks can be just as important as the way words work. Feelings that pass from person to person can be shared, expressed, repressed, or stored in the color of a wall, the presence of birch bark, the height of a window. I do not see the world in the way Meg manages to see it, and to not have that sight, and yet see that sight at work, is thrilling. Rich lets us see her work, in her work. She tells us “you can call on beauty still and it will leap/ from all directions// you can write beauty into the cruel file/ of things done things left undone.”‡ It is a teasing irony, that she points to how simple beauty comes in such beautiful terms. But this is also Rich at work, with herself; *we* are not the you, but the you is that version

* Carson & Freeman, (15).

†“Contradictions: Tracking Poems XIII (Dedications),” (727).

‡ “Calle Visiòn,” (763).

of her in all her past poems, in all her past attempts (and successes) at beauty. Rich is always working, always letting us watch her work, and it fills us with trust, that these tremendous invocations of firm belief and valor can be always re-examined, re-tried, re-visioned. Kristina says she recognized her friendship in me when she saw how differently my mind worked than hers. Watching the friend work, their hands or voices or minds doing what my own cannot do, is an affirmation of that friendship; not reflection, but vicarious fulfilment. It is a reminder of the deepest wellsprings of the experience of others, a rejection of Montaigne's perfect reflection. I may be reflected by my friends, but that reflective surface is the skin of a great body of water, in which there is much more than just myself to be revealed.

Sometimes we can't be friends, and I want to know why. I am sitting in the Blue Hill Library, and Carl passes by, pauses to hug and say hello. Carl, who I've met two or three times through his boyfriend, the bookseller, who sat for drinks once and talked of his film projects. I want friendship from/with this man. I sense this great potential well up as we talk, that we could continue to speak back and forth, with “universal warmth, temperate, moreover, and uniform, a constant and settled warmth, all sweetness and smoothness.”* Yet each time the potential wants to find fulfillment, as we talk, something else wells up, I cannot yet articulate it, which quells the potential, withdraws the opportunity. Carl moves on to his own table in the library, after we promise to text and find time and eat and drink. We do not. At the threshold of friendship, we “remain eternally a guest.”† Why do friendships die in the Charybdis of acquaintance? Why, even though “there are things we might have talked about,/ and there are signs we might have shared in common,” we instead find ourselves “uneasy” as we “try to make appropriate conversation?”‡ Why do we think we're not worthy of making friends?

Will Rich be my friend? “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.”§ Often, the reader cherishes the poet in an intimate way, carrying her poems, feeling

* Montaigne.

† “By No Means Native,” (10).

‡ “Sunday Evening,” (32).

§ “Contradictions: Tracking Poems XIII (Dedications),” (728).

recognized by her poems. Rarely, though, does the poet so explicitly seek the friendship of the reader. Rich is invoking her reader that they might speak *back*, that she might hear their response. I carried Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck" for many years, memorized. Sometimes I would speak it to others, to my friends, to share it with them, and sometimes just to myself. Is this what friendship is, to carry the knowledge of the other into your own life? It is a great comfort, to think that I am being thought of. Is this what the poet wants? Not immortality, but friendship? To be carried in such a way? "I know you are reading this poem/ in a room where too much has happened for you to bear."^{**} Who else is allowed in such rooms? The lover, the friend, the family, and the poet. Dan, who plays Bluegrass music, loved to set his guitars on their stands in places in his living room where he could see them, could admire them. I do the same with my books. Rich sits on my bedside table, and I find those memorized words rising when I am alone. Is Rich there? Will she allow my friendship?

Will I be her friend? To be Rich's friend is to be or do as Rich hopes we will do. What does she hope us to do? To be faithful: "listen to me:/the faithfulness I can imagine would be a weed/flowering in tar, a blue energy piercing the massed atoms of a bedrock disbelief."[†] Will I be faithful, to Rich, to the women before and after Rich, to Woman? And to be Rich's friend, I should not, as Montaigne does, "seize his whole will, brought it back with equal concurrence and appetite to plunge and lose itself in mine."[‡] Instead of sameness, Rich asks that I see her in her difference, that "I must allow her to be at last//political in her ways not in mine... defining revolution as she defines it."[§] And yet, Rich also discovers how "it is strange to be so many women,"^{**} that to try to know someone's politics, to know someone *in their difference*, is to *be* them. And yes, to be Rich's friend must, I'm sure, mean to be revolutionary, to be furious, to find a voice in me which will "taunt[...] extinction/ with its wild, crude *so what?*"^{††} What decisions do we make to be friends, what kind of commitment are we prepared to give? Lily says "a

**ibid*, (727).

† "Waking in the Dark," (358).

‡ Montaigne.

§ "For Ethel Rosenberg 4," (544).

** "After Twenty Years," (364).

†† "Contradictions: Tracking Poems 26," (654).

certain level of self disclosure and vulnerability,” that vulnerability is not something which friendship *allows* for the participants, but is *required* of us. I can be vulnerable for Rich, hopefully. I have tried to check my privileges, my conflicts of interest, my prejudices. I have tried to let Rich interrogate me, put me in the tough spot. Will I allow myself to be destabilized in this relationship with Rich? To be a friend of Rich I must become conscious, and “every act of becoming conscious/(it says here in this book)/is an unnatural act.”*

Will I be my friend? I tell my therapist that the rooted shame I carry has prevented me from expressing myself fully in my friendships, has withheld me from the sort of intimacy I once felt with my friends. Rich tell me “I have to learn alone/ to turn my body without force/ in the deep element.”† How can I be a friend to others, to Rich, without being a friend to myself? What do I expect from my friends, that I can try to expect of myself? Lily's 'vulnerability?' To herself, Rich seems to say, “I am gliding backward away from those who knew me.”‡ Do we step away from others to be a friend to ourselves? When I pull away, my friends flare, they try to find me, they probe into me. It is horrible and joyous, to be so loved, and to not know how to express this withdrawal as a means of becoming my own friend, to be a better friend to them. “If I'm lonely/ it must be the loneliness/ of waking first.”§ I wake early to work on this paper, the house asleep, because I know to speak to myself is to speak into the empty room. When I withdraw, what friend do I find? Georgia tells me it is “cocooning,” that we withdraw into ourselves sometimes, to recuperate, to process the changing that's happening to us, to return in new colors. Georgia, the only writer and director I'll ever act for, who squeezes my hand on a stage and I shed real tears, because with the same generosity that she offered in telling me I was allowed to cocoon, and be a friend to myself, so too will she split her own cocoon open, and share the sprouting inside. Rich writes “we circle silently/about the wreck/we dive into the hold./I am she: I am he.”** When we retreat, we do so to circle the wreck of ourselves, to split into our many selves within our cocoons, and try to be a better friend to those many selves. Of this poem, “Diving

* “The Phenomenology of Anger 8,” (381).

† “Diving Into the Wreck,” (372).

‡ “Moth Hour,” (201).

§ “Song,” (369).

** “Diving Into the Wreck,” (373).

Into the Wreck,” I write for a presentation “a poem I memorized three years ago and carried with me, to share with friends, to be a friend to myself, to ask me important questions just when I didn't think I could bear hearing them.” The friend asks important questions. Will I ask those questions of myself, when the time comes?

Dialogue: In the void shaped like the Catholic faith I used to adhere to, I shout to my books for answers. I send offerings in the night, while I read myself to sleep with Rich these past four months. Sometimes she answers. Is this a friend, this talking book, who speaks back to me?

Rich: We look at each other

Me: but what is the “other” that is seen?

Rich: Like an unbearable mirror of his own

Me: Does seeing the self present in the other make that self more bearable?

Rich: I can't know what you know/ unless you tell me

Me: And when we voice ourselves, is this enough, are the words enough to stop being another?

Rich: I've listened to your words/ seen you stand by the caldron's glare/ rendering grammar by the heat/ of your womanly wrath

Me: How grateful I am to see this witchery in my friends!

Rich: Brave linguist

Me: Can the friend teach me to be brave?

Rich: I live now/ not as a leap/ but a succession of brief, amazing movements//each one making possible the next

Me: Baby steps.

Rich: and I think of those lives we tried to live/ in our globed helmets, self-enclosed/ bodies self-illuminated gliding/ safe from the turbulence// and how, miraculously, we failed

Me: But I don't feel brave, or even that I want to be brave, here with you.

Rich: There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep,/ and still be counted as warriors

Me: Us, together? Is there a place for me to sit and weep, among these, your, women?

Rich: “I think you thought there was/ no such place for you, and perhaps there was none then, and perhaps/there is none now; but we will have to make it”^{*}

Lukas and I have known *of* each other for many years. He went to the same high school, after I graduated. I knew his older siblings, our mothers know each other, he worked with my friends. But somehow we never met. Then, his face appeared on Grindr, that notorious digital space for LGBTQ encounters. We said hello, and spoke then of being gay when few around were gay. He and I both lived elsewhere from each other at the time, but when we returned to our families in tandem, we would reach out, chat. Our friendship rose in our shared difference, in “the fact of being separate.”[†] I have had no other friendship like that with Lukas, knowing and caring little for other aspects of each other's lives, invested and attentive and caring to this aspect, to this separateness. Lukas and I, friends, are strangers. We found friendship in how “we who work this way have often worked/ in solitude,”[‡] in this particular solitude we shared in this place. Lukas and I could recognize in each other this shared experience, but little else. Finally, after a few years of chatting on our various apps each time we happened to be on this peninsula together, Lukas and I met. We carried blankets onto the beach at midnight, and lay talking. We shared coming out stories, shared pity for the limits of straightness, shared anxieties over danger, over HIV, lay in that small pocket which we could share with each other and few others. We kissed, because we were friends under the blanket of that particular sameness, and nothing else. We watched the stars, and Rich watched the dawn, and “we were meant to see it:/ After this, we may sleep, my sister,/ while the flames rise higher and higher, we can sleep.”[§] Is this friendship partial, abbreviated, false, because it is not based on a whole reckoning of each other, but this particular sameness in difference? Or does this bond have its own distinct tang? “Did anyone ever know who we were” Rich asks, “if *we* means more than a handful?”^{**} Yes. Someone knew

^{*}“Dialogue,” (370) “An Atlas of the Difficult World I,” (710) “For Memory,” (536) “For Julia in Nebraska,” (532) “From A Survivor,” (397) “Re-Forming the Crystal,” (414) “Sources XXIII,” (588).

[†] “When We Dead Awaken 2.” (357).

[‡] “White Night,” (419).

[§] *ibid*, (420).

^{**} “Contradictions: Tracking Poems 25,” (653).

who we were. “I started feeling in my body/how that burden was bound to our backs/keeping us cramped in old repetitive motions”^{*} The I become we. We knew who we were.

A curtain sweeps down, and there are those behind it, no longer lit, and those before it, leaving their seats. Are the friends performers? Do we do our dance for the laughs of others? I think of some friends who perform with me, to great excess. Kristina and I close-talking in the middle of the office, Viktor and I jousting ideas in the Colgate dining hall, Tori and I fast-talking with each other to such an extent that Kyle thinks of us as radio DJs. Is the friend a performed self? When we're alone, do we go to our own dressing rooms, wipe off the make-up, bitch about the work of the friend when we get home?

A curtain sweeps down, and there are those behind it, no longer lit, and those before it, leaving their seats. Is the friend on the other side of the curtain? Do we perform ourselves on their behalf? Fulfil some presentation of self in a half-daft attempt to satisfy them? There are those who speak of this performance of a self with disdain, but are they the ones who lack the self-awareness to recognize such a performance? What's the difference between a self and a self-performed? And is there a better eye, a better gaze, to perform self for, than the friend?

A curtain sweeps down, and there are those behind it, no longer lit, and those before it, leaving their seats. Is the friend in the seat beside me? Is the friend that person whom we are able to watch the performance of life, who can see the stage from the angle which we see? Perhaps this is a criteria for friendship: not sameness but the ability to see through the angle from which I see. Are we spectators to the drama of the world, sharing that observer's stance together?

A curtain sweeps down, and there are those behind it, no longer lit, and those before it, leaving their seats. A book, a paper, a poem ends. A voice stops. We can read it again, but we can never read it again for the first time. Rich cries out “so tell me where is my home;”[†] Rich cries out “you, the person, you/ the particle fierce and furthering;”[‡] Rich cries out “—O my terrified my obdurate/my wanderer keep the trail;”[§] Rich cries out “Yet still good-by,

^{*} “Five: Voices,” (795).

[†] “Rhyme,” (998)

[‡] “Telephone Ringing In the Labyrinth v,” (1041).

[§] “Axel, In Thunder,” (1073).

because we live by inches/ and only sometimes see the full dimension./ Your stature's one I want
to memorize—/your whole level of being.”* *A curtain closes. A book closes. A poem ends.*
Won't you be my friend?

* “Stepping Backward,” (25).

Introduction:

*I was struck most when I first read Tori and Rebecca's piece by the following words: "We have talked throughout this class about what feminism is and I believe it is this. Coming together from different, even similar experiences, to create a community of validation and acceptance." This encapsulates the experience, more than anything else, of reading not only these letters and responses, but of reading their source document as well—Rich's *Of Woman Born*. It's validating, and as a reader observing this conversation I feel my own experiences being validated by observing this form and by the act of community inherent in these letters.*

What I noticed about the exchanges in "A Rich Correspondence" was the in-your-face, on the page working out of what would normally be considered inner lives. Guilt, sexuality, blame, anger and dead mothers all abound, and no punches are pulled in Tori and Rebecca's in depth mulling over and consideration of the same. Get ready, reader. Because in the words of Marshall Mathers, this shit's about to get heavy.

The tea is being dished. Not only are the inner lives of the letter writer's addressed, but Rich's own inner life is held to the fire, too. In anger, not at Rich, perhaps, but her words, if that can be a distinction made. This is one of the few texts in this collection that seem to wholeheartedly ask Rich to step on the brakes a little, who demand of her the same sort of inner shit-sorting that she demands of us as readers and citizens.

— Martin Conte and Ryan Stovall

Exploring Rich through poems and *Of Woman Born*

Victoria Hood and Rebecca Teaks

For a personal exploration of Rich, the suggestion was made to engage in a pen pal style conversation discussing *Of Woman Born* as well as some of Rich's other work which held

similar themes. We are physically separated by many years but emotionally quite connected by experiences shared. We explored this relationship in writing and in discussion of Adrienne Rich's work through our correspondence. Our goal within these letters and our subsequent responses are making arguments not to do directly with her own arguments, but rather using her writing to contextualize our arguments. By this, we mean that we draw from her text, but also from the sentiment and meaning behind her text, but we are not making overall claims about Rich's experience; simply, we are drawing from Rich's experience to make sense of our own. We also draw from each other's experiences to make sense of our own.

To help aid in your reading of the initial letters and responses this is how we have separated them: the initial email is in italics and left justified, the responses we wrote post to the email are non italic and right justified. The person who wrote the response to the letter is not the one who wrote the letter, rather it is the other writer reflecting on the thoughts of the letter post-pen-paling. We have decided to not sign our names to the letters so that it remains somewhat anonymous. Although, it may be easy to parse out who is who, we did not want our voices to be conflated with names or preconceived notions of who we are.

Thurs. March 28, 5:24 pm:

Of Woman Born, page 221 and others: "It is hard to write about my own mother"

This particularly stuck out to me as a daughter without a mother. My mother passed away when I was 16 and there is a lot that I regret looking back on my relationship with her. We were close and generally very nice to each other, but it makes memories no less painful. It is hard to write about my own mother - so instead I focus my creative writing making up parents and killing them so I can discuss it there. I think Rich does this interestingly, by discussing her mother in her own prose.

We discussed in class once what it must feel like for Rich's children to know their mom didn't want them. Would it change the love they have for their mother? Would it change their mother's love for them? I know I was an accidental baby and I don't think it has changed my perceptions of my mother. I know that I was the reason my dad and her got married, but it doesn't change their love for each other or for me. The day my mom died, my dad lost the love of his life. The woman he has been in love with since they were 14, but that doesn't change the fact that they didn't date until after my brother was born and had me a year later.

Why is it hard to write about traumatic events? I don't feel like my mother has died again throughout this email, but I feel like I'm forced to remember her. I have spent the past six years trying to focus on things besides the void of my mother and this class has made the void become my reality (as it seems like it may have for you as well?). I'm not a mother, but it is hard to write about my sister. I feel this ownership, this protective, motherly nature that I want to shower over her, to protect her. I'm not sure she wants it, but now she lives with me and my boyfriend and I fear that one day she will lose her mother and rather place me in the spot that makes it hard for her to write about me.

Did this page stick out to you? How do you feel about the quote? I look forward to hearing from you.

Looking back now, I realize I never remarked on the “unwanted” aspect from my own perspective. I know I was wanted as a child, but I didn’t want children myself. That was mostly because I was always told I couldn’t have them, so when I discovered my pregnancy it was overwhelming and I feared I would not feel the things I was supposed to feel for my child. In retrospect, it did take me awhile to find those emotions, but I don’t feel it is because they weren’t inherently in there, I think it is because I had invested so much effort in convincing myself they weren’t that I had to work at bringing them back out. As the mother I suppose one day my own children will struggle to write about, it serves to consider Rich as a mother (and wife) since she finds such fault with her own mother. Rich speaks in terms of the anger she felt and struggled to suppress in relation to her children, they were clearly a burden she recognized as a barrier to her ability to be herself. She acknowledged her husband was kind and generous, willing to help with the children and chores which was not typical of men in the fifties. She then goes on to remark that, “it was clearly understood that this “help” was an act of generosity; that his work, his professional life, was the real work of the family” (27) she goes on to say that she realized her writing wasn’t contributing to the household, in fact she says it often cost them money but her husband wanted her to be happy so he paid a housekeeper so Rich would have some free time in which she could write. What troubles me is her resentment toward him despite all he tried to do to please her. It is as if she somehow holds him responsible for the fact that her writing wasn’t making money - her books were being published. If they weren’t being purchased, how is that on him? She speaks of how she experienced “[her] depression, bursts of anger, sense of entrapment, as burdens [her] husband was forced to bear because he loved [her],” she further says she “felt

grateful to be loved in spite of bringing him those burdens” (27) did she ever once consider that while she was experiencing all this resentment toward her husband, he was doing everything in his ability to be what he understood was his role in this societal construct as well? He wasn’t domineering, disrespectful, or belittling as far as her writing goes. He didn’t demand anything of her, he gave her anything she wanted even if she did have to ask him (because he should have been a mind reader and just known how best to help I suppose). The poem Rich wrote in regards to her late husband:

XXII:

I have resisted this for years, writing to you as if you could hear me. It’s been different with my father: he and I always had a kind of rhetoric going with each other, a battle between us, it didn’t matter if one of us was alive or dead. But, you, I’ve had a sense of protecting your existence, not using it merely as a theme for poetry or tragic musings; letting you dwell in the minds of those who have reason to miss you, in your way, or their way, but not mine. The living writers especially, are terrible projectionists. I hate the way they use the dead.

Yet I can’t finish this without speaking to you, not simply of you. You knew there was more left than food and humor. Even as you said that in 1953 I knew it was a formula you had found, to stand between you and pain. The deep crevices of black pumpernickel under the knife, the sweet butter and red onions we ate on those slices; the lox and cream cheese on fresh onion rolls; bowls of sour cream mixed with cut radishes, cucumbers, scallions; green tomatoes and kosher dill pickles in half-translucent paper; these, you said, were the remnants of the culture, along with the fresh *challah* which turned stale so fast but looked so beautiful.

That’s why I want to speak to you now. To say: no person, trying to take responsibility for her or his identity, should have to be so alone. There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors. (I make up this strange, angry packet for you, threaded with love.) I think you thought there was no such place for you, and perhaps there was none then, and perhaps there is none now; but we will have to make it, we who want and end to suffering, who want to change the laws of history, if we are not to *give ourselves away*.

While there is certainly beauty to be found in this, and I would not mean to suggest that she felt no love for him. Of course, her situation was complicated and frustrating, she was trapped in a life she didn’t want. But he was just as trapped, from Rich’s own testimony, her husband loved

her deeply and treated her with more respect and kindness than many women received in those days (or even today). From this, I still see the selfishness on her part, her willingness to crush him in order to forward her own interests. Where does one draw the line? How can one resolve the need for one's own desires over the needs of another that has done everything right but can never be what is needed. When Rich speaks of her writing as "threaded with love," in regards to her late husband, the word threaded holds many connotations. On the one hand, thread is what binds fabric into form. There is relatively little thread in comparison to the amount of material it holds together, but it is the strength of the overall structure. When something is threadbare, it is shabby and worn. Yet in this respect, it seems less about strength and more about sparseness. Her

love for him was not equal to his for her simply because it couldn't be. The unfortunate consequence seems to be his inability to navigate in a world where she wasn't his constant. Yet, in her need to be her own person, she took away from him what she had been looking for. He seemed to have had what she always wanted. As a result, Rich took her anger at the patriarchy out on perhaps one of the few men in her life that wasn't any of the things Rich was angry about.

This goes to the image of Rich that I have as intensely privileged and self-absorbed: of course when one partner in a marriage is unable to bring their share of the fifty-fifty to the partnership, the one going above and beyond is being burdened. How does Rich find resentment in her husband being willing to make up the difference out of love for her? Simply because she didn't want to be married and have children in the first place? Even in her "entrapment" she had a life of security and privilege: how many have the luxury of hating all the good they have because they feel it was forced on them? Everything male in her life was a burden to her, everything that made her have to think of the needs of another only took away from the most important thing in

her life: herself. I suppose that is why we struggle to grasp some of what Rich says, you selflessly accepted the responsibility of caring for your sister after the loss of your mother. It wasn't required of you, there was no societal expectation that you should. You just did. For whatever reasons, despite whatever struggles, you did and continue to do. I could use Rich's argument: I never wanted any of this. I could whine about the ways I was forced into this situation. The difference is I don't blame my children; I don't regret them. I would willingly have died for any one of them (and almost did a few times) and without question I would do it all again. I'm not suggesting she didn't love her children despite her resentment, or that they were

somehow unaware of this love. I just know I wouldn't allow any sense of expressing my personal desires or frustrations to come at their expense.

Thurs. March 28, 8:31 pm:

I think Rich comes from a place of anger toward her mother, "I felt my mother had chosen my father over me, had sacrificed me to his needs and theories" (Of Woman Born 222) not only because she obviously felt her mother chose her marriage over motherhood, but I think she was just angry at her mother for being a traditional woman. I think about my mother in this way, I can relate to the feeling that she chose my father over me, as Rich felt. My parents were married and struggling to have a child for 10 years before they had me. Then my parents' marriage started to fall apart and my mother was filled with anxiety constantly. My parents would disappear for hours to argue about whatever while I sat there alone watching television. Then my dad died. My mother changed, but never remarried. She never even went out on a date - she was a widow at 42. My mother never said anything to me that made me feel unwanted or unloved. It is still hard to write about her. It somehow feels disrespectful if I talk about things that paint her unfavorably - even if they are true: "Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past" (221). But, is it any better to only say good things? Does only remembering the happy memories diminish her somehow? Those unpleasant parts are still parts of her that I am losing if I cast them from my mind. Precious moments I am evacuating from the only place she still exists simply because I cannot bear to feel again the pain and anger. But some day I will just be a collection of memories too, what will my own children carry of me when I am gone? I worry if my faults fade from their memories, they won't have much left of me to recall.

It has been ten years (almost, July 7 is the anniversary) since my mom passed away. It was sudden, I had to make the decisions about her care. I had to make the choice to take her off life support because I knew she was already gone. I held her as they pulled the breathing tube out. They told me I should leave the room - you don't want to see this, they said. I refused. Why would I sacrifice the few moments I had left over something so stupid? Do people really walk away for such a thing? I thought, clearly you people have no idea what I have already experienced or you wouldn't even suggest that I leave my mother's side. She was my best friend. It had only been a month since her mother had died. The two most important women in my life were gone in the

blink of an eye and I was hollow. I struggle more now with the reality that more of my children's memories of my mom and my grandparents are fading or don't exist at all. That is the part that brings the pain. Knowing that I bear most of the burden of remembering and my mind is not what it was. Every strand that unravels is just gone. No one else remembers it, no one else was there.

On page 223 Rich talks about some rivalry she felt she won because she had a son and her mother didn't. I don't ever recall such an emotion. My mother was SO glad to be a grandmother. Surely, Rich felt some things I cannot understand because I never felt like I was forced to be anything in relation to my femaleness. My mom wanted me to go to college and be successful. No one ever told me it was my job to be a wife and clean a house, but maybe that is because we always believed I couldn't be a mother. (Crazy, right?) But it took me until after my mother was gone to begin my academic journey. I deeply regret not doing that when she was here. Do you suppose we are seen from whatever other side there might be?

I look forward to hearing your thoughts

Reading this as the first response I received was heartwarming to see that I was not alone in my feelings. I am not someone who often thinks my feelings need to be validated, but there is something special that comes out of this validation. We have talked throughout this class about what feminism is and I believe it is this. Coming together from different, even similar experiences, to create a community of validation and acceptance. This blends the ideas that we have felt throughout *Of Woman Born* with mutual experiences, but they also allow us to feel things separately together. This idea of separate identities, separate experiences, but a mutual convergence of appreciation and validation creates a shared understanding. I was asked in this class how this experience of my mother's death differed from my fiction writing, or how I normally express my sorrow and I think it overlaps with a different sentiment. People die, people's parents die and there is something that is immediately bonding over this experience that allows me to feel more vulnerable and validated. I believe it behaves a lot like being a woman in today's age or being a feminist or being a part of the LGBTQ+ community, but this community is comprised of death, sorrow, regret and dead parents. The unique thing about any community is that it creates a safe space to be (or hopefully will) and I think these reasons allowed me to experience my mother's death differently.

Sun. March 31, 8:45 pm:

I'm not sure how we're seen from any side. Sometimes, I'm not sure we are seen. I struggle sometimes trying to see myself from my mother's eyes, because I am sure she would be proud. I think she would be proud of me as long as I am happy, but mostly she would be proud that I did not follow in her steps. "It may also seem ironic that the growth of nineteenth-century feminism, the 'false' liberation (to smoke cigarettes and sleep around) of the twentieth-century flapper, the beginnings of new options for women as birth control gained acceptance and use, may have had the initial effect in weakening the mother-daughter tie" (234). This line stuck out to be as Rich seems to penalize second-wave feminism, something I think my mother identified with. I think she would be proud that I don't smoke cigarettes and sleep around, but those are two of the things that she did to liberate herself - although I think she would smile in rebellious worry at my times of carefree experimentalism. I feel that my mother tried to see me from all sides, but that my father does not. I think he is happy with any side I present to him, but he would be much less proud of me for claiming my sexual domination of myself than my mother who felt she had worked to help women claim; then again, that may be something that is harder for men to understand than women.

My mother was the first one to have a boy in my family for many generations and was surprised, because they had told her it was supposed to be a girl. My brother is now a step-dad and I can only imagine the pride in my mom's eyes holding Karleigh. I think those are the hardest times and hardest ways to remember her. I feel guilty remembering the bad times or speaking ill of my mother, as you have stated, but it feels easier than remember the happiness that I'm now missing. My mother overdosed on liquid morphine and it was deemed non-suicidal, but neither of my siblings agree. I had a dream once where she told me she did it on purpose without realizing what she was really doing and I believe it to be her attempting to communicate with me. She apologized and I think I latch onto this as some sort of closure. My siblings watched my mom dying in her bed, but I wasn't there. When my dad identified her body at the morgue he suggested I stayed home and so I did, but now I feel like I'm floating somewhere in between knowing and accepting. My sister only remember the bad or nothing at all. It is amazing what the mind will do to protect you. I remember too much and too little. Sometimes I envy her, but I feel selfish in these feelings, because I also wish Emma could remember anything to help her see the amazing person my mother was.

“Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free” (236). I remember when I dyed my hair pink with half my mother's permission and she was mad because she didn't want me to be like her. In looks, people say I am my mother, exactly, but in personality I follow much more my father. I craved to be my mother, I still do. But I'm not sure that is good, I know that is not what she would want. She would want me to be myself, to be better than her, not to get pregnant and waitress, but to follow my dreams. What I saw though was someone who was willing to do anything for her family. Someone devoted. Someone who was given a shitty life and turned into something. My mother was in and out of foster care, sexually assaulted, and emancipated at 14. I'm not sure how she ended up with everything she did, but she did and I'm amazed at her rebellious attitude, her free thinking and how she knew what she wanted. I'm a lost child wishing I can make up my mind for what I want for dinner. It is now, when I remember her well that I wish I could turn it off. Do you ever feel this? Do you ever wish we could turn off the sadness, turn it to madness and forget the happiness to numb the sadness? Boy, this class is killing me.

I look forward to your thoughts,

I think in this I should have acknowledged what was undoubtedly a painful admission and instead I moved past it. I understand now the difficulty in reminiscing about your mom. I want to say how sorry I am. There certainly is a heavy burden on those that are left to mourn suicide.

What seems especially tragic (for myself as an outsider) is the fact that she had love, a loving family, had struggled and won despite all the obstacles in her path. Something inside her was still broken though, something she couldn't repair. I have dealt with suicidal ideation borne of depression, in so many ways the only reason we are carrying on this conversation is because I think of my children when the feelings become overwhelming. I keep the urges of self harm in check by considering what it would do to my children if I were to leave them.

For the Dead

I dreamed I called you on the telephone
to say: Be kinder to yourself
but you were sick and would not answer
The waste of my love goes on this way

trying to save you from yourself
 I have always wondered about the left-over
 energy, the way water goes rushing down a hill
 long after the rains have stopped
 or the fire you want to go to bed from
 but cannot leave, burning-down but not burnt-down
 the red coals more extreme, more curious
 in their flashing and dying
 than you wish they were
 sitting long after midnight

If I consider this in relation to Rich, her internal struggles were outsourced, she never seemed to be considering ending her own life no matter how miserable her situation was presented to be.

This is because she always seemed to be blaming someone or something else for the imperfection of her existence, yet at the same time felt the problems or feelings of others were inconsequential. Her poem, *For the Dead*, is an example of this: “The waste of my love goes on this way // trying to save you from yourself” is love wasted in this way? How can someone who sees everything wrong with her life as the result of other people’s conduct also feel so self important that expending her energy on another is wasteful? The lines: “I dreamed I called you on the telephone// to say: Be kinder to yourself // but you were sick and would not answer” seem to say even in her sleep, dreaming about something she never says she actually did, her time is wasted because the person was sick and *would* not answer. The word choice here is significant. In saying would not rather than could not, Rich implies she feels there wasn’t anything actually preventing answering the call. This person wasn’t sick as in bedridden, unable to physically get to the phone; this person made a choice to not answer which resulted in Rich wasting her time on a handful of dreamtime telephone rings. Which apparently annoyed her enough that she felt she was wasting her time and her love on an ungrateful person.

Looking at that, I consider that her husband ended his life, for reasons one could only speculate on, but it seems plausible that he loved her so deeply that he couldn’t negotiate a life without her.

Perhaps he felt the weight of what he perceived as his inadequacy to be a good husband, he couldn’t figure out how he failed. Obviously, Rich could never be truly happy in a relationship that squelched her sexuality (especially since it was so important to her) but if the mindset at the

time was that homosexuality was some sort of curable condition, he must have felt some level of responsibility in Rich having said condition. I wonder if her children blame her for the death of their father? I wonder if she would even care if they did.

Tues. April 2, 6:08 pm:

I don't think men (in general) can understand because even when they are demeaned it comes at the expense of women: you fight like a girl, man up, sissy, etc. but the way to correct whatever it is they are being told is woman behavior they just stop being like a woman. In contrast, everything a woman does is scrutinized and presented in an unfavorable light unless it goes along the prescribed behavioral expectations on either side of the feminist fence. If the behavior allows a woman to claim some sort of personal autonomy that resists traditional roles, patriarchal portrayal is ruthless: she sleeps around? slut, she chooses to be single? crazy cat lady/can't get a date. She says no? cock tease. Likewise, if a woman chooses to engage in the traditional role then she is judged just as harshly from the aggressive feminists that belittle her for being a sheep. The shock some people would express over my having a large family was full of condescending remarks: "you know how babies happen, right?", "no cable TV in Maine?" or my favorite, "it's a vagina, not a clown car." The tendency to put women down no matter what they do or just for the externality (too skinny/fat, too much/not enough makeup, wrong clothes/hair, etc) is only about control whether it is recognized as such or not. Men have been taught women need protection and to be provided for. A dad doesn't want to think of his little girl in terms of her sexuality because he then has to acknowledge that his role in her life will be diminished because her husband will now be the source of that protection (conceptually speaking). From my own experience that protection was magnified to smothering. My father had convinced my mother that every experience beyond sitting in the living room watching TV might somehow contribute to my demise. I wasn't allowed to ride a bike until I was 11, only then because my grandmother (mom's mom) bought me a bike against my father's wishes. I wasn't allowed to have sleepovers, or play ball with the neighborhood kids. I was confined to the experiences my father would allow me to have. Yet I never felt like my mother was a willing participant in his control. I felt she had been manipulated into it. Perhaps I perceived my mother as being less intelligent than my father (or maybe just naive) and so I never held her accountable in the way Rich did her own mother: "...I still feel the anger of a daughter, pregnant, wanting my mother desperately and feeling she had gone over to the enemy" (224).

I have had similar experiences with death of loved ones that you describe. My mother wouldn't take me to see my father (who was in a care facility in the last few months of his life because it was too much for my mom) one day when I was really insistent. She said she would take me during visiting hours the next day. He passed away during the night and she notified everyone else in the family before me. I woke up because I heard her on the phone. I mean, I get it... who wants to tell their child news like that? How do you prepare for such a thing? You can't. But it doesn't mean you just don't do it. I was hurt for a long time. Later, when my grandmother was in the hospital on life support my mother and my aunt took her off the machines the day before I was coming down (I had to wait until to get a rental vehicle). She died before I got there. My mother had a stroke less than a month later. The weight of taking her off life support was completely on me. My grandfather couldn't process losing his daughter so soon after his wife of almost 68 years. Not that it would be his decision to make, as the only child my mother's care was on me. Even though I knew she was gone, I still torment myself wondering if I did the right thing. I do wish I could turn off the sadness, I don't think it will ever go away.

I've been so scattered - please forgive the rambling.

Do you see the time that has passed as healing in any way? I find I can laugh at some memories now that I couldn't even handle a fleeting thought of for a long time. The angry memories are the ones I still can't engage with. Not of being angry at her, but angry at the way other people in the family treated her. She had finally found a place of acceptance with her church and she was gone. I still remember the tears in the eyes of the man that came to give my mom a blessing. He put his forehead against hers and said "Why you Lilly?" I had never even met him before and he loved my mother like she was his family (he was my age at the time with a wife and two young daughters - my mom was like another grandmother to the girls) It killed me more knowing that she had finally found a place that made her feel loved and wanted. You're right, this class is killing me too.

This might be painful, but I am grateful for this conversation with you.

This idea of maleness is very interesting, especially in the aspect of feminism and womanhood. I am particularly interested in this now as I am planning my wedding without a mother. How does a father fill that spot? I love my dad, but I am long for my mother to be by my side helping me make these decisions. Helping me become a wife in the sense of how she was a wife. Is that the

patriarchy? Telling me I need my mom or is this my own wishes? Does it even matter if my own wishes are influenced by the patriarchy if I still wish them? You reflected on this too. When are we allowed to claim our own feelings without feeling this guilt? You reflect very interestingly on how women are seen by men and our 'purpose' for them, although this purpose is more a perceived reality than anything, but I find this to be an interesting thing as the world moves forward. I see an interesting overlap between this and how we see female athletes in today's day. If we break expectations and defy what they want us to do then who are we anymore? Women, girls, or just some aliens.

Mon. April 8, 11:28 am:

I think you really hit the nail on the head when discussing men and how they are demeaned by being described as womanly. On top of this, we women as not being allowed to "be like men" in the sense of their sexuality. I feel very thankful for my mother in this regard, because she taught me from an early age to embrace whatever my sexuality may be (both sexual orientation and how sexually active I wanted to be). She taught me both about sex, but also about the anatomy of a vagina and how masturbation works and I think this helped to break down the barrier of sexuality in my own household. However, that does not mean the outside world was as excited about a young girls sexuality being open as my mother was. I lost my virginity before I thought I would, because my boyfriend told me he'd leave me if I didn't (this has always struck me as surprising, because my mother had educated me about this and yet I found myself compelled to fill the wants of a man). My ex-girlfriend told me I was heartless, because I don't like monogamy. These ideals that were implanted with stretch so much further beyond what we see, because even when I felt like I had control we don't ever have control of other people. You bring up some really interesting ideas here when looking at expectations of woman, "Perhaps I perceived my mother as being less intelligent than my father (or maybe just naive) and so I never held her accountable in the way Rich did her own mother: "...I still feel the anger of a daughter, pregnant, wanting my mother desperately and feeling she had gone over to the enemy" (224)." This particularly stuck out to me, because I seems like we hold women to different standards, even as women. This relates back to feminists not being feminist enough, or not the correct feminist. Why do we hold women in such separate, polarizing regards, but men can be praised for not thinking all women should stay at home?

I enjoy readings your ramblings, I enjoy discussing these topics with you, because it has made me take this material in a new light. I'd like to bring this poem back into discussion, because it seems that we have been circulating around it:

For An Album

*Our story isn't a file of photographs
faces laughing under green leaves
or snowlit doorways, on the verge of driving
away, our story is not about women
victoriously perched on the one
sunny day of the conference,
nor lovers displaying love:
Our story is of moments when even slow motion moved too fast
for the shutter of the camera:
words that blew our lives apart, like so,
eyes that cut and caught each other,
mime of the operating room
where gas and knives quote each other
moments before the telephone
starts ringing: our story is
how still we stood,
how fast.*

This poem seemed to be hard for both of us, but for different//similar reasons. What does a picture hold? Does it wake up these memories while also waking up the person? Does this turn my mother over in her urn, her ashes becoming a tornado, volcano, awakened and angry that we woke her from her sleep. You brought up an interesting point in class about the real memories happening between photographs, between the smiling and posing. How do we know when the memories are real? I quickly find that, and have found that, what I remember is not what my siblings do. My sister has almost no memory of my mother, because it just vanished after my mother passed. I am wondering what pictures do for her. Can she remember anymore than she did before? I may email her this poem to get her thoughts and will get back to you on that. This sense of story and moments though is why I hate pictures sometimes. What do pictures hold?

Why do we hold onto them if they hurt us? I sometimes wonder what it would be like to get rid of my mother's presence entirely - no pictures of stories. Would it help? What do you think?

In thinking about the way your mom educated you about female sexuality and how the body functions makes me wonder if Rich would have been as angry about motherhood if she had even one daughter. What sort of virtues would Rich have extolled upon said daughter? Was her disdain for motherhood more a result of her only bringing more men into the world? According to her own words, she wanted a son: "I set my heart on a son" (193) yet she continues to tell her incredibly selfish reasoning for this: "I wanted to give birth, at twenty-five, to my unborn self, the self our father-centered family had suppressed in me" (193) further than this, she wanted a son "to do what [her] mother had not done," and "...as a defiance to [her] father, who had begotten "only" daughters" (193). In other words, she didn't want a son so much as she wanted some kind of conduit through which she could live vicariously. As much as Rich does mention her love of her children, how she, "...passionately loved those three young beings," (194) the infrequency in which she says this compared to the time she spends addressing what a burden they were really isn't a powerful testimony of that love. Of course, that isn't what this is about, but the idea of Motherhood as an Experience should include at least some manner of love. Otherwise, the implication is that it is all Institution, and one could take away the idea that somehow, by not hating motherhood more than loving the children that resulted from the experience, makes one complicit in some continuance of patriarchal imposition.

Tues. April 9, 4:31 pm:

Oh that poem... it made me think of all the moments I have no memory of aside from that image on the film. I have very few memories of my father, I was 13 when he died. I remember certain things, a time we went to a little diner and he told me he worked there when he met my mom. He pointed to the place where he was standing when he saw her walk in. They were getting divorced by the time he was telling me, we were out as part of his 4 hours on the weekend visitation with me. He also told me about a song he heard on the radio that he really liked, but he couldn't remember who sang it (it was "I Want to Know What Love Is" by Foreigner) it is honestly the most I can remember of him in one event. A few months later, he took me to eat at a nice restaurant and gave me a necklace for my birthday (I still have it) I was 11. But I don't

remember anything we spoke about. I remember him taking me to get my ears pierced - but only because I know he did, not because I can actually recall any interaction with him aside from walking beside him to the kiosk in the mall where I had it done. I know we went to Canobie Lake Park every summer, but all of that is amalgamated into one moment of sitting in the flying elephant ride with him and one time on a carousel that he waved and smiled and said his nick name for me every time I passed him (which, I am not even positive happened at Canobie Lake Park - that's just where my mind places it). I have so many pictures of him, most of which I have no context for. Everyone else that was there is dead too. I don't even have the chance to reminisce.

With my mom, it is different. A lot of my friends knew her, remember her, can share stories of her. My children knew her. Those memories are fading (or never even got to catch hold) for all but my oldest son and oldest daughter. Without those pictures, my children would only hear stories of this person that loved them so fully. But they can never know her. The absence of these relics wouldn't lessen the pain. Pretending she didn't exist wouldn't make it true. I suppose we banish these thoughts as a way of self preservation; the pain becomes so intense that it is unbearable. Ejecting the thoughts is the only way to keep from going insane.

“words that blew our lives apart,” this is the line that ruins me inside. It isn't about the organized and filmed marriage proposal, or the walk across the stage to receive the rolled up paper representing the diploma or degree that will arrive in the mail weeks after the fact. It is the moments we are wholly unprepared for, good or bad. My oldest son telling me he plans to move to North Carolina this summer, finding out I was accepted into the Grad program and got the TA position, being asked to be president of the women's organization at church, being told my second son had a condition that was “incompatible with life.” You see, I also come from the perspective of a mother that has lost a child. Which is why I struggle at times with Rich. She talks about what was imposed on her as a woman without realizing that there is just so much privilege oozing all over her indignation. In her entry from her journal 11/1960, she writes: “there are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom” (21) this is how she feels, at that point she has three little boys (born in 1955, 1957, and 1959) and is probably overwhelmed. It is the follow up remarks fifteen years later that infuriate me: “The term “barren woman” was easy for me to use, unexamined, fifteen years ago. As should be clear throughout

this book, it seems to me now a term both tendentious and meaningless, based on a view of women which sees motherhood as our only positive definition” (21-22 footnote) to me, this goes back to that highly judgmental feminism. Women suffer from this condition, not all because they are brainwashed into thinking making babies is their only value. Some women see motherhood as a blessing, if every woman rejected motherhood as an imposition, the human race would cease to exist. It doesn't mean it is all we are good for, it means it is our birthright. To dismiss women that would choose to be mothers simply because it isn't the choice she wanted to make, Rich just passes judgment from the other side. So if women don't agree with her ideology they are less than the women that do? Isn't she defeating her own argument about being forced into imposed expectations?

I got a little carried away there, back to that poem and the questions. At the end, “...our story is // how still we stood, // how fast.” this is what we see when our memories fail us, the moments we can't account for but we know they happened; the events that took place before us, around us, despite us. I remember the circumstances of the births of my children, each one individually. It is probably the only distinct set of memories I have of anything. I can replay portions of each of those days and/or nights in my mind as though they just happened. I remember things from grade school, high school, different jobs, different places: but I cannot separate them the way I can this set of seven memories. This is how I know I am not tricked into thinking it is important for some patriarchally indoctrinated reasoning. If it wasn't important to me, the most important thing in my world, I wouldn't remember it all so clearly. That's my take anyway. What do you think?

I'm so glad you suggested this.

I particularly enjoyed reading your thoughts on this poem. You have such an interesting way of breaking down this poem and really delving into the meat of it. This analysis of poems and womanhood together have a big overlap for me. How we approach and create meaning can be shared or tampered depending on the context we are working within and I think this speaks a lot to this poem. The creation of memories, the creation of an analysis can overlap and become individual. This is one of the key points that I have come to throughout this communication with you. This is the movement I would like to see feminism taking. Acceptance of the other side whether we overtly agree or not. Why must we silence others that disagree with us when we can respect differences? When does this become dangerous? What is more dangerous: to allow free

thinking or to silence those you disagree with? Why am I coming up with even more questions now? I guess this goes to show that this conversation is never really over. Not only between us, but between us and the world that we are moving around in.

Mon. April 15, 9:01 am:

I enjoy when you get carried away, it is interesting, helpful, and productively hard to read through all of these emails, but it helps shed light on these writings and on my own mind more. My condolences for all that you've lost - I could not imagine it. I've never lost a child, I've never had one either. I sometimes feel as though my sister is my child, but she does not feel the same. I feel that I am an emotional caregiver to her and she feels she is her own human; both of these seem to be correct. You had mentioned before, in class I believe, that people had made comments to you about the amount of children you have as well. This goes back to the "right away" of being a feminist. If what feminism is what it is supposed to be, the amount of children you have should not be commented on. Would motherhood at all be commented on? I can remember my soon-to-be-mother-in-law telling me that she was being heckled for not having a child when she first married her husband. I think what hurt her the most, what hurt them the most, was that they tried for ten years, lost five babies, before they had Harry. Why do people, women, men, things, animals, beings, think they can comment on other people's existence? Often, I don't think I can even comment on my own.

"I am a woman giving birth to myself", page 181. I thank my parents heavily for their influence on my life, but I try to track the lines I have felt reborn. Birth, I suppose. The time my mother died. Quickly following, the first I can remember eating, truly eating, while recovering from an eating disorder, when I came to Grad school. The times that life spoke so loudly that I needed to shove myself away before I could crawl out, before I could be a human in this world. This is something that I don't think we have discussed, but in today's day the way we appear, especially on social media now, is one that I think would make Rich shit her pants. Do you find that she would be kind to us? Would Rich understand how social media influencers can be giving birth to themselves. How would she make sense of the things happening right now. It seems like she was alive very shortly ago, but I wonder how much things have changed since then. Rich discusses these moments of change, these moments of transition, "remains an experience of passively handing over our minds and our bodies to male authority and technology" (182). When are we

allowed to be women who ignore this? When can my birth of myself be my own? When can we have children for ourselves? When can we neglect men and Rich? I feel like maybe I'm misinterpreting, or maybe I'm tired and mad, but does acknowledge this oppression always have to be a state of being? Could we simply turn into a liquid, melt down, slid under the glass of patriarchy and reform on the other side just doing fine, being fine, now solid and no longer a waste? Perhaps (not).

I'm am glad that you have found yourself claiming your memories as not just "important for some patriarchally indoctrinated reasoning", I am happy that you feel this way. I think this is the feeling I was reaching for in my last paragraph. This allowance of our feelings being our feelings - something that seems to be swept away sometimes. If we only feel a way because of the patriarchy then we could never melt away, but if we claim our own feelings then it seems possible. I really like the line you pointed out "words that blew our lives apart". As English grad students I am sure words mean a lot to us all. I believe we are both creative writers as well and these words we create, the words and worlds and things that we craft, that we give birth to always help us blow our lives apart and together. There are countless times I've cried over the loss of my mother, of my aunt, my grandparents, that the words that brought me back together were the ones I made up. We all need something to bring us together again. You point out the real world words that blow our lives apart, but I wanted to through in the ones that we create. The birth we have given.

One aspect I didn't engage with and now have some thoughts on is the very end, "you point out the real world words that blow our lives apart, but I wanted to through in the ones we create," I know your creative writing is often in relation to your family (I don't know if it all is) this act of creating, of birthing our feelings in a way we can raise (editing/revision) and then see them off into the world after we have given them the best possible start (publication) really does relate in a writer's perspective. I wonder if you plan to create physical life? If so, the family you miss, the loved ones that are gone, you may see them in your child. I remember when my older daughter's eyes started to lighten instead of darken as my son's had done. When one day she woke and looked up at me with eyes blue as my father's I was looking into eyes I hadn't seen for a decade and a half. It was overwhelming. You may again see your grandmother's smile, hear your aunt's laughter, or hold hands like your mother's. It is the most powerful reminder that they do indeed live on through us.

Perhaps in time, your sister will have that experience too. Perhaps it will all come flooding back to her. If we are in fact “women giving birth to ourselves” then there is no end to the self discovery that awaits us.

Sunday April 15, 11:55 am:

I'm sorry I took so long to respond. I think I was caught up in the idea of what is “our own” then I realized nothing really is. If we over analyze every little thing, look for all the ways a particular ideology permeates social structures, we are going to find it. It's like being on a debate team and having to argue all sides - if you ponder it long enough, you will make the argument for or against whichever “side” you take. I will say, in the section which you reference, in some ways I agree with Rich. I refused to have a male obstetrician, I wanted a midwife; someone who could truly relate to my experience not because they watched it happen or read about it, but because they have physically experienced it for themselves. Rich uses material from Suzanne Arms which I find helps to put some of this into perspective. Arms discusses the way men might respond to requests for help while in labor: an “early” Christian man might cite scriptures that confirm the pain as her punishment for being a woman, whereas the “modern” doctor might just give medication. These responses take away from the woman by trying to control her experience. “When primitive woman turned to the midwife with that same look of desperation, the midwife rightfully interpreted the plea to mean “Assist me,” “Support me,” “Tell me this is supposed to happen”“(183) this does show the transformation that puts this profound female experience under the control of man. Rich then takes this reasonable observation of a wedge in the maternal experience and goes on in the next section to talk about how she feels sexuality is extracted from woman's power and from motherhood, which I can't quite fathom. I'm not sure how one would feel some kind of sexual gratification from nursing their baby or why one would want to. To me, that goes back to Rich's very self focused agenda. When Rich claims, “the divisions of labor and allocations of power in patriarchy demand not merely a suffering Mother, but one divested of sexuality,” (183) makes sense in some ways. How many women are made miserable when trying to feed their baby in public but those same women would be ogled wearing a skimpy bikini? The problem is that Rich seems to be saying it is acceptable for a woman to engage with and explore her sexuality as she sees fit Which seems reasonable until it comes at the expense of others including her own baby - is it not exploitative to gain some sort of sexual pleasure from your infant?

I realize that floated away from my initial intent to share thoughts on your assessment of how Rich would view the misrepresentation that has become public engagement through social media: the ways people paint a perfect picture and put on a happy face despite their material struggles, emotional tornadoes, and general familial dysfunction. It is Rich's generation's problems presented as a front that is meant to appear as some shining achievement of perfection. Pictures of smiling faces at perfectly set tables, everyone living their best life by someone else's criteria. All she fought against just repurposed like a coffee can bank or granddad's old shirt sewn into a throw pillow. When you asked when we can be our own, it seems the only way we can even begin to do that is by disregarding categorization and living as we wish despite being put into a box we may or may not agree with. So much energy is invested in forcing other people to see us as we wish to be seen. If we could all just accept each person as they are, I supposed we could then live our lives instead of trying to find validation for them.

I have loved this conversation with you. Thank you for choosing me.

I am most interested in the wording you use of “Thank you for choosing me”, because truly I do not think I could have done this project with anyone else. Although it may seem like because I asked you if you would be interested in this that I chose you, but your experiences, your openness, your willingness to discuss these things in class chose me. I think this gets at that feeling you speak of when wanting a female rather than a male midwife (although this is speculation, because I have not had a child), but I wanted to discuss these things with someone who would understand, someone who I felt like our experiences could provide definition, trajectory and honest observance of each other. You chose to then say yes to this project, to open your heart to my heart and bleed into the open wounds of each other. I do not think I would have been able to be as honest and bloody and raw with someone else. I don’t know that I could have written in a way that turned into this if it wasn’t for you. They say that writing is therapeutic (who is they? Perhaps Ben or our class or the patriarchy or feminists or everyone and no one all at once). I agree, but it sometime depends on your audience. For me myself as a audience is great and usual, but you were also this for me. The therapy of relating, submerging and bonding is what helped in my digestion of this material.

Introduction:

Dear Matt,

You explore the way familial interaction is negotiated through families in a way that I think many people may be able to relate to. You draw from Rich in a way that allows the reader to feel both a connection to your family as if Rich has been a part of your family all along. This allows for us to feel like you have allowed a Rich-ian lens to your familial relationships; these relationships being something that I think many of us have been accustomed to. Strained family, strained voices, strained relationships, strained juices flowing from our cup of blood.

Your exploration helps to tie into this letter format that we have experienced throughout these Rich responses to Rich's work in a way that opens up our understanding of Rich. You work along similar lines as myself and Rebecca in our correspondence, but now you are using Rich in a way of looking at more male views of family - would Rich enjoy this? Most likely no, but I don't think that stops it from being an important view to explore. How do men and women view their familial relationships? By looking at our texts in relation to each other it helps to explore this differing point of view.

With compassion,

Victoria Ellen Hood

Matthew Hammond

This is NOT for US, but it CAN be

Note: I've been going back on forth in my mind of whether or not I should share this text. I feel that may have betrayed my father in the writing of this letter. I feel that I failed to capture the patience and love that he has in his being. I fear I have been selective in this presentation of him in that I did not capture the entirety of his humanity. My father is a private person and he raised me to be a private person and I consider myself to be a massive departure from his "plan." I have reservations about sharing these accounts of my father with the public, any

public. Our relationship is complicated, and it's ongoing. I'd just like to note that this letter I've written to him is also for me, a reminder to remain compassionate if I ever become a father myself. My hopes are in having written this letter I will continue to be mindful of myself and my surroundings as I grow and mature. The "Father" is him at this moment, and it is myself in the future. My reservations surrounding the release of this letter are concerns with the exploitation of my father's character. He has been a great influence on my own character, and my character has been a continuation of his positivity as well as a response to his negativity. His voice is a voice I cannot rid from my head, though I have tried to suppress it time and time again. I hope that someday my voice will not have to be suppressed or cast aside, I hope my voice carries weight. His voice is one of domination and honesty, a man with nothing to hide; though at times I'd prefer he keep it hid. He's not for you, but he can be. This letter is a testament from a conscious son to his vocal father, as well as himself. Twenty of Adrienne Rich's poems are spliced into this letter as I have seen fit. Reading her work has sparked a conflict in my mind between her ferocious rhetoric and his politically charged voice. This letter is me trying to blur the lines.

Dear Father,

I'd like you to take a moment to think about connection. When I drove across the country to experience America, I found the greatest experience in spending an evening with your brother. *"The drops rained down as if the heavens bled;/ And every dawn we woke to hear the sound,/And all men knew that they could stanch the wound,/But looked out and cursed the stricken town,/The guilty roofs on which the rain came down."** Just three years older than you, Kent is the closest connection to your being living on this planet.

The two of you shared a father, mother, siblings, a home, and despite that connection; I find that your ideologies are inherently split. *"When language fails us, when we fail each other/ there is no exorcism. The hurt continues. Yes, your scorn/ turns up the jet of my anger. Yes, I find you/ overweening, obsessed, and even in your genius/ narrow-minded--I could list much more--/ and absolute loyalty was never in my line/ once having left it in my father's house--/ but as I go on sorting images of you/ my hand trembles, and I try/ to train it not to tremble."*† My earliest

* "The Rain of Blood": A Change of World (1951)

† "Rift": A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1978-1981)

memory of my uncle, your brother, was in 2001 when he took us to see the Oakland Athletics play the Boston Red Sox at Fenway Park. *“Let us only bear in mind/ How these treasures handed down/ From a calmer age passed on/Are in the keeping of our kind.”*^{*} We watched Pedro Martinez carve through the Oakland lineup and at the time I was completely unaware of your competing ideologies. Like a child, I was in the dark on the feuding minds that grew up in the same home, ate from the same pot, and sat just a seat away from each other. *“All night the roots work/ to disengage themselves from the cracks/ in the veranda floor./ The leaves strain toward the glass/ small twigs stiff with exertion/ long-cramped boughs shuffling under the roof/ like newly discharged patients/ half-dazed, moving/ to the clinic doors.”*[†]

In 2017, as I sat on the couch next to your brother, your father’s third son, my uncle, I realized that there is no man left on this planet with such a similar upbringing as you; and that amplified my wonder of both your similarities and your differences. *“Enclosed in this disturbing mutual wood,/ Wounded alike by thorns of the same tree,/ We seek in hopeless war each other’s blood/ Though suffering in one identity./ Each to the other prey and huntsmen known,/ Still driven together, lonelier than alone.”*[‡] Though no religious sect has permeated our family for a long time, I wonder what instead we have inherited if not religion. *“This handless clock stares blindly from its tower,/ Refusing to acknowledge any hour./ But what can one clock do to stop the game/ When others go on striking just the same?”*[§] Has our family only inherited ideologies--concepts that are subject to change? Is it this fascination with the political that has set you and your brother apart from each other? *“Where is the bush or cloud without a flaw?/ What bird but feeds upon mortality,/ Flies to its young with carrion in its claw?/ O foundered angel, first and loneliest.”*^{**} To me, it seems, without a religion to connect our family, our family has chosen the game of baseball as a placeholder. *“They say the ground precisely swept/ No longer feeds with rich decay/ The roots enormous in their age/ That long and deep beneath have slept.”*^{††} You were both raised by a man marred by war, and you and Kent’s eldest brother followed your

* “The Uncle Speaks In The Drawing Room”: A Change of World (1951)

† “The Trees”: Poems (1962-1965)

‡ “The Prisoners”: Poems (1950-1951)

§ “A Clock in the Square”: A Change of World (1951)

** “Lucifer In The Train”: The Diamond Cutters (1955)

†† “For the Felling of an Elm in the Harvard Yard”: A Change of World (1951)

father into that service. The two of you, products of service, grew with a certain divergence that can be characterized by political ideology, social ideology, and self-ideology. *“Despair falls/ like the day you come home/ from work, a summer evening/ transparent with rose-blue light/ and see they are filling in/ the framework/ the girders are rising/ beyond your window/ that seriously you live/ in a different place/ though you have never moved.”**

The two of you were connected by athletics; baseball and basketball. You played on the same high school teams, you had the same teachers, you even had the same friends. This divergence in character can be even be traced to your handedness on the baseball diamond. *“My predecessors blind me--/ their zeal exhausted among roots and tunnels,/ they gasped and looked up once or twice/ into the beechtree’s nightblack glitter.”†* You, Norris, a right-hander who mastered control and precision with his pitches. And Kent, a southpaw of great strength who dominated batters with his power. This difference is also emblematic of your political identities, Kent leaning left in the progressive realm, and you leaning right with your conservative bent. You, Norris, have spent the entirety of your life on the east coast. Why? Your worn down body has kept you here and kept food in our mouths and a roof over our heads. *“As for himself, he joined the band of those/ Who pick their fruit no matter where it grows,/ And learn to like it sweet or like it sour/ Depending on the orchard or the hour.”‡* Your physical sacrifice is well-examined in our home. Early mornings leaving us for Boston to work job sites in the city, and returning as a drained, broken down man in the evenings. *“Going home by lamplight across Boston Common,/ We heard him tell how God had entered in him,/ And now he had the Word, and nothing other/ Would do but he must cry it to his brother.”§* Was that your plan? Was that his plan? Kent moved to the west coast at his earliest opportunity to do so. Why? He sacrificed his mind to support his family and his mental sacrifice is well-known and well contested by way of brain tumors that called Kent’s physical being to action. *“All changed now through neglect. The steps dismantled/ By infantries of ants, by roots and storms,/ The pillars tugged by vines, the porte-cochere/ A passageway for winds, the solemn porches/ Warped into caricatures.”***

* “Dreams Before Waking”: North American Time

† “Merely To Know”: Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963)

‡ “By No Means Native”: A Change of World (1951)

§ “A Revivalist In Boston”: A Change of World (1951)

** “The House at the Cascades”: Poems (1950-1951)

I wonder father, do you question YOUR self as ferociously as I question MY self? Does Kent question HIS self? You both worked on farms, completed your chores, but there was a split that cannot be ignored. You, Norris, elected to make your way with physical labor as an instrument of vitality, while your brother chose to use his mind. *“Soon we’ll be off. I’ll pac us into parcels,/ stuff us in barrels, shroud us in newspapers,/ pausing to marve; at old bargain sales:/ Oh, all the chances we never seized!/ Emptiness round the stoop of the house minces, catwise, waiting for an in.”** Is that enough of a difference to separate yourselves from each other? I believe that we ARE informed by what we are NOT. There is strength in recognizing the opposition, do you see it father? If one stone is thrown at you, how many do you throw back? *“The gilt and scalloped laughter/ Reaches us through a glaze,/ And almost we imagine/ That if we threw a pebble/ The shining scene would craze.”†* How many return? Will there ever be no stones left to throw? *“But stones are thrown by children,/ And we by now too wise/ To try again to splinter/ The bright enamel people/ Impervious to surprise.”‡*

I wonder father, have you read Rich? *“For years I struggled with you: your categories, your theories, your will, the cruelty which came inextricable from your love. For years all arguments I carried on in my head were with you.”§* Have you heard of Rich? She writes the type of material I’d expect you would reject, resist, and ignore. Why is this? *“Our fathers curse the crooked time/ And go to their graves at last;/ While some of us laugh at doming men,/ And others sigh for the past. And the dazzled lovers lie/ Where summer burns blue and green,/ In the green fields they’ll be saying/ Can never grow again.”*** She writes about the material you don’t think should be discussed in college. You think she has a slant? Do you know about your own? Do you see? *“Good men grown long accustomed/ To inflexible ways of mind--/Which of them could say clearly/ What first drove kind from kind? Courteous to any stranger,/ Forbearing with wife and child--/ Yet along the common roadway/ The grass still grows wild.”††*

* “Passing On”: Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963)

† “A View of the Terrace”: A Change of World (1951)

‡ “A View of the Terrace”: A Change of World (1951)

§ “VII: Sources”: Your Native Land, Your Life (1981-1985)

** “Orient Wheat”: The Diamond Cutters (1955)

†† “The Roadway”: The Diamond Cutters (1955)

Are you threatened by this material? Do you threaten this material? If this refusal a last ditch effort to live? Do we need to be called by our names in order to learn something new, or can we adapt and stay aware? *“For every angry, simple man/ The word is but/ A shadow, and his motive grows/ More still and great/ While the world hums around him, wild/ That he should explicate.”** If this is not FOR us, who is it for? Can we even learn if we don’t adapt? These are records.

With compassion,
Matthew Taylor Hammond

* “Apology”: The Diamond Cutters (1955)

Introduction:

Hey Ryan,

Prolific, profound, proud. You look at the way that feminism can inform a family as well as the way Rich can inform relationships. By not only looking at relationships with your parents, but looking at relationships with your siblings, wife and children you allow for a world in which we can sneak Rich into everything. How does Rich make sense of your dad, your mom, your brother? How does Rich sneak her way into your bed at night and your house?

I enjoy the way that you utilize the letter format to incorporate the Richness of her prose and the form of poetry. Utilizing the multiple ways that Rich communicates with the outside world allows for an interesting view of how the feminist values have become a part of your written world. The way you meld into my own text allows for a view of my life within your life within Rebecca's life within the life of Rich. Sometimes drawing from Rich specifically, but also drawing from your life to contextualize Rich. Always allowing for the reader to enjoy this trip down memory lane, future avenue, and Ryan Stovall ave.—Victoria Hood

**Look At Me
Ryan Stovall**

*Look at me.
-Severus Snape**

Dear father,

As with any funeralistic rite, this letter is more for the sender than the recipient—if poetry can bridge the gap between art and therapy, perhaps the genre of Final Project for Ben Friedlander can do the same. And as such, I intend to be as truthful as I can. Which of course is not as simple as it might seem.

* Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Bloomsbury, 2007

Did feminism—as a concept, that is, one that holds that the sexes should be equal in all facets of public and private life—ever enter your life? Were you aware of it as a thing-in-the-world? I can remember without even trying, plenty of evidence to the contrary. Setting aside your failed marriage to Mom for a moment, I remember the string of girlfriends who came through your life afterwards, from what must have been your mid thirties all the way up to the point when we stopped speaking, when you were approaching sixty, and how you referred to various confrontational women as “bull dykes.” While at the same time, I also remember you taking us (Spider and I) to more or less beg left over food from the neighbor woman when Mom was at work for the week.

I’m curious: have you ever identified within yourself an inherent fear in women? Rich, drawing on work done by other writers she categorizes as “post-Freudians,” puts stock in the idea that men are inherently afraid of women, and hate them because of this fear, and that this fear and hatred are what lead to hierarchies (with the man being dominant, of course) in relationships between men and women. In this system, any power inherent to women is seen as a threat by men, and that power is always portrayed in a negative light, regardless of how it manifests itself* (71). I don’t know, even as far as just myself—I can’t find any identifiable fear of women in me. But I was just curious what you thought. In any case, I never saw you hit a woman or establish dominance in any physical, overt way, and I don’t believe you did. No—I’m guessing your misogyny is more a sin of ignorance and omission. How were you to know how to behave toward or interact with women besides how you learned from your father, *The Man Who Drank Himself To Death*?

Setting aside feminism for a moment, I do want to thank you for breaking the chain of alcoholism in our family. You were in AA by the time I was born, and you’ve never drunk a drop since. I detest absolutes and see abstention as a form of weakness—how little will power you must have to not be able to self regulate without complete denial!—but, knowing how behavior is learned, I thank you for your sobriety nonetheless. If there is one thing you did for the Spider and I, it was that.

* Rich, Adrienne C. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, New York, 1986. All quotations from Rich are from this text unless otherwise stated.

Speaking of passing down behaviors, I wonder how much of your mental illness is lodged inside of me. I seem to have dodged the worst of it—my depressions and anger could just as easily have come from Mom—but I do have to wonder if I’m already seeing your rat-holing hoarder junkman symptoms manifesting themselves in my son. There’s still hope—the kid’s just three, of course—but still, I’m wondering if some piece of genetic code has made its way from you to him. Time will tell.

It was your madness that ultimately drove me away (and the Spider too, from what I can gather—he’s never been much for talking about painful topics). And from what I’ve gathered from Mom, it was the same for her. Imagine, if you will, the courage she must have had, taking two boys, aged 8 and 3 respectively, and leaving—choosing to support us on her own!

Or maybe it wasn’t courageous at all. Maybe she felt like she had no choice. How does it feel to know that there’s a good chance your wife thought it would be easier to raise two boys by herself than with you? That rather than being an asset, you were a burden?

As with any poet who gets stuck when attempting to write something decidedly un-poem-y, I’ll insert some verse here. I wrote this the other day during my 101 class*, when my students were busy working and I was feeling pretty low. I haven’t retouched it—this is more or less raw me down on the page. I’m sure Freud would absolutely wet himself reading it.

Checking In

Does the wind still blow
where you are and still bite

your grizzled jaw?
I only ask because

we’re at eighty months now
since we’ve spoken, and well

you’re no spring chicken.
There’s every chance

the whitefish schooled up
in that deep pool below the falls

* They all passed.

are safe from here on out,
and the whitetails can flag

and bounce without fear
of your old winchester,
and the bees in that hollow
cedar leaning over the river

will keep their honey this summer,
just as the chickens will keep

their heads and remain both
unscalded and feathered.

There's every chance
you're in the ground

and being fed upon
rather than the inverse

which means there's every chance
I've missed mine, meaning

I will have to take on regret
and memory as surrogates

for what I was angry with
and stopped speaking to.

You spoke to me once of a perfect boyhood summer you had when you were eight, living out east of Billings, before your family moved up to the big northwest woods, and before your father's alcoholism crushed him and his family. You told me about going out riding with your father every day, cowboying, and how happy you were. You told me you never really liked the woods. And it seems pretty clear that what you tried to do after Mom left you was recreate that perfect summer—Mom left and the horses arrived, and pretty soon you were taking Spider and I out riding every day. You seemed to enjoy it, I remember, even though we did not. I remember telling you to go, to move back east, to leave the forrest you'd never grown to love and live in the fertile grazing land of that eternally blissful summer in your mind. I hope you did.

Hi Mom,

You at least, being a college student of the sixties, knew about feminism. I still remember finding *The History of Sexuality* on your shelf and trying to power through it when I was about

fifteen. That, and there were so very many other books (“Gee, thanks mom for getting me hooked on this whole English thing! What a joy this is! Really working out well for me!”*) of yours that I read and pondered.

Sadly, they were probably more lucid in my mind then than now. Say what you will about the effects of compounded TBI’s,[†] but the bottom line is nothing seems to stick anymore without a ridiculous amount of concentrating effort. Or it could just be the incandescent joy of an aging mind. Who knows.

Either way though, thank you for exposing me to so much back when I actually *could* remember and make sense of it! And so it doesn’t seem like much of an assumption to guess that you also read the bulk of those books, and some idea of feminist thoughts must have been present in your mind. I can’t say for sure—we’ve never spoken of it directly, aside from the occasional sharp verbal admonishment you’ve give me for sexist or chauvinistic behavior.

So, I have questions. Well, one big one, at least. How did you remain (somewhat) sane while married to Dad? And his behavior afterwards, after the Great Split, that is—is that not tragic? I don’t know, I’m spit balling here. It would be even more difficult for me to understand you than it is to understand some random person—the biases of proximity render even a semblance of true understanding impossible.

Rich was a twenty years older than you, so she was already adulting during the Repressive Fifties that your generation grew up in and revolted against. But how were things between you and Grandma? I never really got to see much of your relationship—by the time Spider and I were born she was already in her sixties, and by the time I remember her at all she must have been around seventy. So I feel like a lot of the issues Rich talks about as occurring between her and her mother must have already been *vorbei* by the time I was old enough to have been aware of them.

What about the oppressively pervasive patriarchy that Rich’s book is so fundamentally concerned with? I never remember you speaking of it directly, as a thing in and of itself, as philosophy, without some manifestation exemplifying it, but I’m certain from your life experience and your reading you were aware of the issues 2nd wave feminism was struggling

* Notice that I did not say “Really working out good . . . “

[†] Traumatic Brain Injury—yours truly got his bean rattled a couple times in the Army.

against. I do remember you talking about the men you worked with in particular, and I remember burning with a teenager's righteous anger at the injustices and slights you underwent and attributed partly—never in full: you always were very just in laying out your grievances, and I remember how you inevitably mentioned that your not having a Master's degree was partially to blame for your lack of advancement (and Boom! here I am now, chasing the same pink dragon! What you got, Freud?)—to the men you worked with. I'm sure you already know this, but if it ameliorates the sting at all, men in positions of small power (show me a man in any position of power with the Three Ss—Short, Spectacled, and Smart—and I'll show you someone waiting to reek tiny passive aggressive revenge on everyone who's ever picked on him!) wield that small power over men as well. Although I'm sure it manifests itself differently than it does when they are demeaning or controlling women. You were the first to teach me steps for how to overcome such toe-stubs, and for that I thank you.

Phew! Getting a bit wordy—time for a poem. This one is, and always was, for you, Mom.

Sans Shield

All mothers always stand, stiff and proud,
for all the world to see. But all mothers
have always longed to whisper to all sons,
sans shield is fine, just return to me.

I'm not sure what Rich might have said with regard to me running off to fight in the wars the way I did (I'm pretty sure she'd have seen even our marginally righteous response to 9/11 as nothing more than an extension of and buttress to the patriarchy), or about me not letting you know that I was enlisted until I called from Basic Training. I did the former for me—it seemed like it needed to be done, and there I was, able to do it—but the latter was all for you. I didn't want you to worry any more than I knew you would, so I delayed the start date of said worry as long as I possibly could. I am sorry—it was the best measure I could come up with. To this day I don't know how mothers and wives stand it (or husbands and fathers either, I suppose—having worked in an all-male unit, I forget how many women serve, and they are certainly also worried about!)—the waiting, the not knowing, the telephone call from halfway around the world that could be your son wanting to chat and let you know everything is fine, or, as you know, it could be your son telling you, “Now listen, Mom, I don't want you to worry—I'm alright, but I did get

a little dinged up.” Or it could be just a knock on the door. Jesus. Like I said, I don’t know how you all stand that. And I am sorry for those “dinged-up” phone calls—sensitivity training was not on the curriculum of the SF Qualification Course. I did the best I could. I am sorry.

Hey Spider,

What have you learned over the years we’ve been apart, brother mine? You were a child when I left for my first go-round in college—still in high school when I joined the Army—and I don’t really know you well at all. But maybe you can help me figure out why it was that after I got out and we were both living in Missoula, I never saw you more than maybe two or three times a year. What is it in both of us that compels us apart?

So, talk to me. What do you know of feminism? Or to come at this from a different angle, have you ever noticed in yourself an inherent fear of women? I asked Father the same question in another letter, because I am curious. I still need to pose the question to myself and do some more serious thinking about it, but off the top of my head I can’t identify instances in my own life. Just curious. Let me know.

In any case, you’ve clearly learned patience and acceptance, two things I’ve always lacked and which have been even more absent since my time in the Army. Did Mom teach you those things? You had those years after I left the house where it was just you and her together. I imagine it must have been something of an idyllic time for both of you, with her well established at her job by that point and me and my anger out of your hair.

Maybe that was when and where you learned your calm. Or maybe you’re not calm at all. I know you’re prone to the same fits of depression that seem to plague our whole family. And I know from Mom that you’ve compared yourself to me and found yourself wanting in your own eyes. It’s a sad thing, brother, to hold yours truly up as a model of success.

Where’d you learn golf? Or more accurately, where’d you learn to enjoy golf? And—side bar—how is enjoying that nonsense possible? There are so many things I don’t know about the adult you became. And the various blasts and falls I’ve experienced have blanked a large part of our childhood—there’s one entire visit when I came home from the Army for Christmas, an entire month, that I can’t recall. That’s not helping either.

Mostly I remember being angry with you. I’ve always wanted to be alone, and I couldn’t understand why you did not. Come to think of it, that’s one of the things I’ve never understood about other people in general, why they seek company more times than not. Anyway, that would

seem to be the root of my anger with you when we were growing up—you just would not leave me alone.

I hated you for it. And I'm so sorry I did, Spide. I'm afraid that that child I was colored our relationship beyond recovery—I'm afraid my cruelty, trying to drive you away and leave me alone, has been the driving force of our adult relationship too. It doesn't seem like much of a stretch, anyway. If that is the case, well, I'm so sorry for that.

It's funny to me that you were the first to cut ties with Father—that it was you who recognized his madness as such and took measures to insulate yourself from it—you who cut the painful cord. You took the lead on that one brother, not me. So know that about yourself—you can define your life in-and-of-yourself, not in relation to me. You can lead, you can grow, you can become. However you see yourself, you don't have any reason to compare yourself to me. And trust me, you only hold me in the regard you do because we don't know each other very well. If you did know me . . . Must be poetry time. I love you, Spider. Be whole and be well.

Sonnet

A strong oak's not proud
fighting winds on a bare hill.
This tree is lonely.

Hello my dear,

Where's the man you met and married, you may be asking. Well, I'm (somewhat) sorry to say it, but those days seem to be gone. In my case, growth and change has entailed something of a mellowing, to put it lightly. The all-nighters in Stuttgart, going up to breakfast in the Fernsehturm to watch the sun rise—the loading helicopters at one in the morning for a two o'clock door kicking, after which those of us not medevac'ed to the hospital wouldn't beat the morning back to base—those days are, as they say, long gone.

And what type of man has replaced your former husband? Bookish—I'd say that's a safe adjective to begin with. Boring sort of follows right in line with that too. Angry (or angrier)—the therapist says that there's the thrill of combat to blame for that one. What else? Risk adverse also seems to apply—it seems like only about once a year anymore that I can get up my courage enough to try and drown my friends on a float, or run up and down the cliffs of Katahdin. And don't forget libido-less—(insert appropriate metaphor indicating drained-to-empty here).

Those last two, at least, we have our three wonderful children to blame for. The latter's been proven—as far as I know, anyway: men's sex drive does fall off when they start having children. And wow! We didn't just start having children—the only way we could have acquired more of them more quickly is if we'd adopted an orphanage. It's a shame—the lost sex drive—I suppose. But at the same time, it's nice being able to focus on my writing and poetry (I hesitate to say “art” at this point) without constantly being distracted. And what a trade off! The kids, I mean—I wouldn't trade our three demon spawn for Austin Powers' entire supply of mojo.

The risk aversion also may make sense when viewed in the light of having kids. I know, it's quite the change from ten years ago, when suiting up for a night time HALO* jump from eighteen grand was common, and lucking into a two-way shooting range in Afghanistan was considered quite a thrill. Now, thanks to our darling angels, I see my death everywhere—wrapped around a tree at an icy corner—drowned when out fishing—mangled in a freak elevator accident in Neville's 1926-model lift. I can't imagine dying anymore, not now that I have so much to lose. (I might add that I'm scared shitless of one of you dying: the idea of living beyond the death of one of our children, or of you yourself, terrifies me—see “One Hard Frost”).

Anyway, one more thing you seem surprised about my behavior is my ever increasing concern with various aspects of feminism. It seems to seem all the more surprising to you because of the slightly (read “unbelievably,” maybe) conservative patriarchal culture and family you're coming out of. Russians! Ha! Who the hell thought that was a good idea?

I'd like to think you fell in love with and married me because I represented—even at that long distant time, almost twelve years ago now—a more liberal view of many things, including male-female relations, than what you'd grown up with. And that that was appealing to you. I don't know. What I do know is that I've moved much further toward liberal thinking since, and that it occasionally freaks you out. For example, my easy acceptance of homosexuality as an extant and acceptable thing-in-the-world seems to make you queasy when it has come up in conversation, while the fact that I've got fairly good friends (as good as any of the friends I've got, anyway, with the obvious exception of Dan) who are lesbian and gay fairly makes your head spin. It's a block I wish I could move you past, over, or around, especially now that J has come out. I would love to see you continue to be there for her no matter what sexuality she ends up

* High Altitude Low Opening—military skydiving.

with (she's still young, and does seem to vacillate frequently. But of course her switching back and forth only seems to freak you out even more).

Where was I? Ah yes—daughters. Well, you may have noticed, we've got two of them, and the bottom line is that I really can't imagine bringing them up in any other way that open, free, and aware. To put this another way, I expect them to live full, active lives, and the only shortcut I can teach them is to make them aware of the sexism inherent in our cultures (American, German, Russian, whatever). It might not make their ways through the world any easier, but being aware of the biases inherent in everything (even the languages we use! Look at the words assigned masculine and feminine genders in German, for an easy example) should save them some confusion, at the very least. In short, A and E, and their joyful existences, their happiness in life, are why I'm so interested in becoming aware myself, in learning all I can about what women have stacked up against them.

So, hows about joining up with me here? As Rich says

“from birthwe teach children that only certain possibilities within them are livable; we teach them to hear only certain voices inside themselves, to feel only what we believe that ought to feel, to recognize only certain others as human. We teach the boy to hate and scorn the places in himself where he identifies with women; we teach the girl that there is only one kind of womanhood and that the incongruent parts of herself must be destroyed. The repetition or reproduction of this constricted version of humanity, which one generation transmits to the next, is a cycle whose breaking is our only hope (xxxii).

I see us (and you in particular) falling into and teaching many of these engrained behaviors. But that's ok—there's still hope! The kids are still young, and I think the biggest part of this struggle will come when they're older (three nearly-simultaneous entries to puberty should be a wonderful time in the Stovall house!). But for right now—maybe we can let our kids wear whatever the hell they want, instead of the gender-assigned pinks and blues you keep stuffing them in? Maybe everybody can play with the bulldozers and the dolls, and everybody can play dress-up wearing whatever they want? Can we, at the very least, make sure the young man sees himself as equal to his sisters, and more importantly, vice versa? And can we (I'm serious here) get rid of the goddamn Berenstain Bears books, the ones that show Mama in da kitchen, dressed in her nightgown or whatever the fuck that polkadotted blue thing is, cleaning and cooking all day long, while Papa Bear is out working to support the family?

We're already doing some things that set examples for breaking these modes. I cook most of the time, for example, and you're the handyman around the house (fucking screwdrivers, anyway! Who invented those damn things, and why don't they come with a manual?). And you're such a strong smart woman, my dear. Let me increase your awareness of some of these things Rich wrote and I read about ("In a book!"—Dwight Goodman, *Dodgeball*), and then help me spread that awareness to our children.

Here's something else I want you to be aware of that Rich writes about. I've felt more or less these same emotions toward our children myself, and I'm pretty sure you have too.

. . . the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes with held-in rage (21).

I think the key here is to acknowledge these feelings, to give them voice. It's not an admittance in terms of a confession of guilt, because these aren't emotions to feel guilty about, as strange as that may seem. But by talking about them we'll find common ground between not just us, but with other parents. Remember, "many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness" (credit to whoever wrote the *Desiderata*). And as for that feeling of not being "fitted" to the "function" of being a parent, well, as with most feelings of being an imposter, the actions you take belie it. You're a great mom. Rich blames the patriarchy, of course, for making mother-love and mother-anger mutually exclusive (46), but bottom line is a; there's room for both, and b; you're not supposed to be some sort of one-way emotional punching bag.

Here's the poem I mentioned earlier when talking about my fears. It's not a happy poem by any means, but sunny days wouldn't be special if it wasn't for rain. Wait: I think that was a quote from Fifty Cent* (Sixty-Two Cent when he performs in Toronto, of course. That sneaky goddamn exchange rate!†).

* Matt Hammond, Professor Kress' advanced fiction workshop, Spring 2018

† Grant Random, Sirius Satellite Radio DJ (paraphrased).

One Hard Frost

Late sunlight sifts through the trees.
 It's shining almost sideways now,
 brushing cedar fronds
 and a pine's soft spreading boughs,
 and casting blue, bottle-brush spruce
 in stark, hard relief.

Here, there, and again,
 by some strange luck the sun slips by,
 between bough and bole,
 through needle and twig,
 past sprig and shoot.
 Then it pools up on last year's leaves,
 brown or buff or tan,
 wet, damp, or crispy dry,
 and even though
 they're long since dead,
 the sun sets all alike aglow.

There are no fresh green leaves this year.
 Winter still clings tight to the land,
 and although the buds have formed on oak,
 on maple, cherry, and on apple,
 they lack the warmth to swell and burst.

One hard frost will kill them all.

The smoke I'm making rises,
 shifting cold up through the needles,
 through the branches, fronds and boughs.
 Here and there, shafts of sunshine
 filter sideways through the smoke,
 blistering the soft evening light
 to the raw red of a hardened inelastic burn
 desperate for an escharotomy.

There is no such incision to be made
 that will spring open, relieve,
 release the choking tightness
 that has settled in my chest.
 My luck's run out. And so

I stand beside the blackened metal barrel,
 and one by one flick memories

into its filthy maw.
 The smoke rises, it curls, it drifts,
 its sifts between the trees,
 unfurling acrid banners
 that the sun shines reddened through.

Here's a wedding shot,
 my wife in white with glowing skin.
 And there's a goofy family group,
 the four of us all heaped up,
 piled on the floor. Fishing pics go in,
 and action shots of our young twins,
 their sixth birthday, two wicked grins
 side by side in a carnival bumper car.

Last of all my phone goes in,
 eaten by the barrel. A pointless gesture.
 I know burning the messenger won't reverse
 the news he carried to my ear,
 the state trooper's quiet voice
 telling me there'd been a crash
 and then before I even dared to ask
 answering the all-important question—
 there were no survivors.

And finally, to close with very little segue, here's one more incident from Rich's book. Apparently some Frenchwoman asked her if she was working for the Army upon hearing that she had three sons. Two things: First, yes, we're part of society, so yes, in a sense we are all us, men and women, working for the powers that be, of which the Army is an extension. Second, even though Rich uses this anecdote to make a very valid point, I know you would have just laughed in the woman's face and told her to go mind her own brood. And I just wanted to say that I love you for that.

Dear Son,

Feminism: I'll do my best to teach you these things, in the hopes that you come to an understanding of them at a much younger age than myself (first learning some of them at thirty-seven). Maybe then they'll take root, and you can grow to be some of the change I'd like to see in the world. Rich, as I understand it, would have approved. In *Of Woman Born*, she mentioned the issue of lesbians raising sons, and says that there is, "the hope that a young male raised in a politically conscious female community would grow into a new kind of man" (xxxix). I'm sure

she's not suggesting that boys being raised by lesbians is the only way male children can become "new" men. My hope is that I too can help you achieve at least some modicum of awareness. My father broke the chain of alcoholism in our family—it seems reasonable to think that I can do the same for our ignorant engaging in patriarchal systems. That, and the poverty, thank god.

That being said, be cautious, my son! Never let your knowledge of these things castrate you. As with much knowledge, others will try to hold it—and your knowing of it, and their knowing of your knowing—over you. Remember: in the incipient land of the ball-less, the one-testicalled man may still be able to choose (to a certain extent) how he wants to be. So in a sense, this knowledge becomes yet another example of the need for moderation in all things. Find a healthy middle ground of knowledge and acting on that knowledge—for you, for your eventual spouse, for any children you might have. But maintain a hard edge. That alone has gotten me a long ways in life, and to be perfectly honest, it's one of the only things that has.

Something you should be cognizant of as you grow up is an idea that Rich puts forth about men being inherently afraid of women. She blames a whole host of issues on this fear, and her rational, how she gets from "fear" to "consequences" makes sense. She says that this is one of the bases for hierarchy between men and women. That too makes sense. But for you, my son, I have a simple question: Why would you want a relationship with a woman you view as lesser, in any way, than yourself? The only thing I can come up with is it would indicate an insecurity on your part—a failure of ego, in a sense. Be secure in who you are. Find the strongest woman you can (assuming you end up looking to women for your romantic interests—if not, and you're searching for a man to complete you, same thing still applies), someone who can got toe-to-toe with you in as many facets of personality and relationship as possible, and latch onto her like a tick. (Set aside the parasitic connotations here, please. You get what I mean). That's what I did. And (side bar), isn't that how you should establish relationships in general? Friendships, for example: shouldn't you be seeking the strongest (in whichever sense of the word) people to associate with, to spend time with, to enjoy the company of? I don't know. Seems like a no-brainer to your no-brain father.

I wrote this for you a couple years ago, after one of the times when you were so sick. Formal rhyming poetry has fallen out of favor, so I'm sure this will never see print, but "I'm like fuck the critics you can kiss my whole asshole."^{*} So, in a word, this one's just for you, my son.

For My Son, **ll

So you'll know well that I remember how,
I kiss your blond head burning hot as hell.
Your hair tickles my cheek my lips my brow.

I'll cuddle up as close as you'll allow,
two wan sick figures lying parallel,
so you'll know well that I remember how.

You're sick but I too must endure somehow
my child's fever that only time may quell . . .
Your hair still tickles my cheek and brow.

I trace with timid finger one eyebrow
and brush the sweat from sunken fontanelle
so you'll know well that I remember how.

To make you well this life I'd disavow.
I'd give up sense of sight or taste or smell
to still feel your hair against my lips and brow.

I know my time passes even now, so
I'll leave behind for you this **llanelle,
so you'll know well I still remembered how
your hair tickled my cheek, my lips, my brow.

My dear daughters,

I feel like I should quote the Desiderata, seeing as I've found so much wisdom in those simple lines. For example, "If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself." Good, right? How about, "Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass." Wow! And don't forget, "Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness."

^{*} Jay-Z. "99 Problems." *The Black Album*. Rock-a-fella Records, 2003. CD

Maybe I should just get each of you a copy to hang on the wall of your room. And your brother too, of course—being male certainly doesn't mean you're not in need of some wisdom: rather the opposite. Maybe I should get him two copies, the poor little blighter. Or maybe I should just hang a nice one in the bathroom so you can read it every day when you're putting a SEAL team in the water (that's what my mom did, anyway. The hanging, that is, not a SEAL team. Although, I mean . . . ah, screw it! Never mind. Hey, at least you're used to your father's ramblings! Imagine how it must be for the poor people reading this!).

Speaking of getting each of you a copy of the *Desiderata*, there is some concern amongst my “particular community of language users”^{*cc} that sending one letter to both of you, and one to your brother by himself, is in itself sending a sexist or male centric message. I understand—no one is more interested in the individual and individuation than your father. When you get older, in the interest of expedience—I want to see some effect to these words, dammit!—I'll tailor this advice to each of your personalities. For now, just go on being three and almost two respectively.

So, feminism. It's common knowledge I either don't know or lend no credence to the phrase “age appropriate.” Thank god! I can't tell you how much enjoyment I've gotten out of listening to your two-year-old renditions of “Fire Water Burn” (“Fire burn!!! The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire”), E. And hearing you, A, and your brother quote from a litany of explicit music from Jay-Z to Korn never fails to bring tears of joy and pride to my eyes. I suspect at some point (probably about four minutes into your time at public school) I will run afoul of and be required to have some serious talks with the Powers That Be, whose interests seem to be chiefly church, doily knitting, and Policing the Moralities of Others. Oh well, so be it. Fuck 'em.

So, all that being said, I want you to be aware that I'm already taking small steps to make you aware of the world as it is. And the world as it is, my young ladies, sucks ass. For a great number of reasons, of course, but not least among them is the fact that we're still living in a society dominated by men. I would hesitate to ascribe blame for this to any person or group alive today, and besides, blame isn't what you should be concerned with here—the victim/victor blame/guilt game never got anybody anywhere but angry. And given the amount of rage we have in our family (I mean, goddamn, even your calm, centered mother gets pretty irate at times! And of course I spend most of my time circling the broom, having already flown off the handle) the

* The mother-fucking PAR. God rest you, merry gentlemen.

last thing we need to do is get more angry. (Do remind me though, I need to teach your brother how to say, “Don’t make me angry. You won’t like me when I’m angry.” You two are welcome to add that to your repertoire too, of course, but your brother’s the only one of you who is already exhibiting thespian tendencies).

So, men. Can’t live with them, can’t banish them all to an island somewhere, you know what I mean? Don’t worry about it—I don’t either. But the bottom line is that both men and women are going to interact with you with a whole host of preconceived notions of what a woman or girl is, how she should act, what she should do, how she should talk, and behave, and you fuckin’ name it. Break those norms, but do so purposefully! Be aware of what you’re doing! Believe me, as I’ve gotten older I’ve learned that there are plenty of times when conformity (to others’ expectations) is a much easier way to get what you want (look at how your father dresses each day to go to the University, for christ’s sake! I positively ooze dyed in the wool Republican! But everybody from professors to administrators trusts me on sight. Oh, the irony!).

That being said, anybody, man or woman, who tells you the “right” way to act, dress, speak, do, fuck—pick a verb here—you tell them to go jump in the big moral lake on the other side of the horizon. When you get just a little older (second grade? I literally have no idea! Oh what fun we’ll have!) we’ll read *Beyond Good and Evil*, so you can start to get an idea of what it means to conflate opinion with morality. (While I’m on it, watch out for Christians. They’re everywhere, they’re fucking insane, and you can’t trust ‘em. Or Jews, Muslims, Hindus, or other cultists. Think, and figure out morality for yourselves, ok? Don’t let some dead guy’s lazy accepters get you thinking about how easy it would be if all the answers really were written in a book. That’s video-games-in-your-pajamas-on-a-sunny-saturday-afternoon thinking).

At one point Rich gives a summary of what I see and hope for in each of you (and your brother as well, of course). Writing about her sons, she says, “Their lives have not been, will not be, easy; but their very existences seem a gift to me, their vitality, humor, intelligence, gentleness, love of life, their separate life-currents which here and there stream into my own.” I’m not quite as self centered as this quote might make Rich appear—I couldn’t care less about a gift to me. But what I see in you everyday does rejuvenate and give me hope. So easy or not, do live well!

In closing, I’d like to point out that, as per the old patriarchal stereotypes, I really will always be there for you, and yes, I really will kill any man that ever hurts you. That being said,

I'm hoping I can get you to the point where a; you're savvy enough to stay out of those situations if at all possible, and b; if a man does hurt him, you'll kill him yourself.

As you can see, you can take the father out of the Green Berets, but you can't take the Green Beret out of the father (insert inappropriate sniggering giggle here). Here's a poem that (might? may?) illustrate that.

Haiku

My daughter's eyes are nothing like a gun,
 I tell myself when laying her in bed,
 because I can't forget what I have done,
 the memories of bloods I've spilt and shed.
 I have seen muzzle's pupils, round and tight,
 had them pressed delicate against my cheek,
 but when I lay my daughter down at night,
 her eyes are closed, and one kiss *I* can seek.
 I tell myself blood memories must go,
 that my old fears and guilts will drag her down,
 for her I will alter my status quo,
 That I'll put paid to all my sighs and frowns.
 I offer up these vows as if in prayer,
 but know that I will fail in what I swear.

I am trying, though, ok? I want you both to know that. That, and I love you both so much.
 As I said before, live well!

Dear self,

What can be said that you haven't already told I before? The ladies doth protest too much, methinks*? Don't know about that one—seems like they've got a lot to be protesting about. So “too much” would have to be quite a bit more.

Am I inherently afraid of women? Don't know about that one either—I seem to get along with them better than men more times than not. Am I afraid of my wife? That would be scanned†. Maybe. But if so, it's buried deep where I can't get my teeth around it. More work for the shrink, I suppose. And Rich seems to make a nod to this, saying that men, “still live in the

* Duh.

† Duh.

unacknowledged cave of their own subjectivity, their denied fears and longings; and few men can bear to confront that shadow-world” (83). Well, I’ve acknowledged the possibility of this fear, at least, and am willing to confront it. Rich’s whole passage there (I just love that she decided to put us men in a cave, by the way, great choice of image . . .) seems to be arguing for a throwing out of the men with the bathwater, so to speak—that patriarchy cannot fix itself. I think as a *system* she may be right—too many men may be too comfortable in the current way of things. But on the *individual* level, I’d like to think there’s still hope for some of us (me in particular, damn it!).

All that being said, you are doing good learning all this. Hang in there. I know you feel sometimes like society has moved on, as if at thirty-seven you’re a dinosaur, but hang in there and do your thing, and continue to not fear change. Some men are born posthumously.* (Ha! Knew I’d end up back there eventually)! And in that at least, you are still no coward. (And by “do your thing,” it seems that what you mean to tell I is keep learning, and by extension, growing). Change is scary. But she’s got to feed the monkey, man†.

Well, let’s end this on an existentially uplifting note, shall we? Poem time!

Empty Shell

The great terrible humanness is this—I will die,
and my steps across this earth be lost before I’ve even passed.

To what end, then? Heaven? A charade enacted by the fearful.
Famous, infatuation fades; infamous, fascination likewise frays.

Balance? Simplicity? Mere waivers for non-strivers. Besides, what loss
if I am forgotten? No step I’ve ever taken has been alone or first,

my betters scythed my paths, smoothing them before me,
then lent me a finger to hold and led me without stumbles.

If nothing is gained remembering, and nothing lost in forgetting,
what weight does my life carry either way? Why the striving?

* Nietzsche, Friedrich W. *The Antichrist*. Translated H. L. Mencken, 1923. Public Domain

† *The Big Lebowski*. Joel and Ethan Cohen, directors. Performance by Jeff Bridges. Gramercy Pictures, 1998.

To what end!? Procreation? And when even that is denied?
What then is left for you, Empty Shell?

Originally, as you know, that was entitled, “To My Self.” Simplistic. And I can’t claim that “Empty Shell” is much of an improvement. But then, I was in a rough spot when I wrote the first draft of that—my wife and I had just about given up hope of ever being able to have kids, after years of trying (and just look at ya now! You’re buried in little shit-flingers, ya jackass! Be careful what you enter into existential despair over!)—and “empty shell” pretty much summed up how I was feeling at the time. That being said, I feel like Rich does have a valid point when she talks about the male need to be able to procreate as being a real or actual need (119). Of course, she’s identifying that need relationally, saying that men only put that need into prominence as a counterweight to lessen women’s ability to create life. Baloney. I wanted children to play with and to teach, not to prove that I was a man, or a creator of life, or as proof that I hold some “elemental power.” After our five year child-building odyssey terminated (now *that’s* an interesting choice of words! Freud? Whacha got?) with in-vitro, it seems safe to say that in our case it was scientific knowledge that spawned our children, more than either one of our efforts or contributions. I’m sure accusations of barrenness, made by men against women, are still commonplace. But neither you nor your spouse ever viewed our struggles in that light—it was, as with many other things in our lives, merely a problem to be solved.