

## SCHOOL AMONG THE RUINS: An Afternoon with Adrienne Rich, Hotel Northampton, 2006

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When I first met Ms. Adrienne Rich, I had no idea how much our time together would affect me. In a room at Hotel Northampton in April 2006, I drank a cup of coffee from a carafe that she had already nearly emptied. I had just read *Dream of a Common Language* and knew that I was the lucky Smith student who'd gotten to spend an afternoon with poetry royalty, but I had no idea what I was in for.

I skipped two classes that Friday afternoon to meet with Ms. Adrienne in Room 275 to help her sign broadsides of her poem, "Fox." I wasn't an intern at the Poetry Center, and I could feel the young, envious eyes of my poetry sisters piercing the skin on my face the day prior, when Ellen Watson, director of the center, had asked of me this favor, knowing full well what a gift it would be.

I arrived 15 minutes early, smelling of baby formula and Shakespeare, and killed that time in the lobby of the hotel where I met Joy Harjo, who, along with Ed Pavlic, was reading with Rich that week at Smith. Eventually, I knocked on her door: *Hello, Laurie! Come in, come in*, she said. She was wearing black pants, had on a chocolate-colored blouse— $3/4$  sleeves. Her glasses hung around her neck.

The room was not large. The four-poster mahogany bed wore a butter yellow comforter with blue flowers. The creamy sheers on the windows allowed in gallons of light. Enough that we used no lamps. Between the two windows

was a small Victorian writer's desk that reminded me of the furniture in my mother's house. She told me to sit. I chose the bed, asked her if I could jump on it—I felt like a small child.

She lit up: *YES!*

Maybe it was more of a look of surprise. Maybe she was shocked by the question—she said yes, though. And I want to say we giggled, but maybe I giggled and she just smiled.

There was some silence.

Ellen met us at the room, delivered the box of 100 broadsides to be signed, and a green box of twenty-four Ticonderoga pencils—each perfectly sharpened. Ms. Adrienne said she preferred to sign with a pencil rather than a pen. She told me why, but I forgot what she said and *that* wasn't what I wrote down when I left the hotel. Ellen said good-bye, winking at me on the way out. A pair of tiny blue slippers nuzzled one another on the floor by the door.

I was a twenty-eight-year-old (nontraditional-aged) student at Smith, a mother of three, and a poet. I should not have gone into that hotel room expecting to see diagrams and flow charts depicting formulae for perfect poems, or timelines shaped by artifacts of all the things Ms. Adrienne had seen, and blessed, and cursed, but I did. Taking in air soft and unexpected as a newborn, I sat, hiding the openings of my many mouths wanting to swallow her milk. I memorized the pencils, the coffee, her walker, the color of her shoes. I didn't want to pull out my journal in her room; I needed to memorize.

One by one, at the little writing desk between the two windows, she began signing the broadsides. The protruding bones of her hands were bobbing like little fish at the surface of the sea. We talked about Smith and women's institutions, the Poetry Center, Ellen, writing, even husbands. Then we talked about our children.

She offered me an orange from the gift basket I imagine Ellen must have given her (or maybe it was the hotel). I thought of my dad, of home—how we never say no to free food. I peeled it, offered her a slice. She took one.

Three children each, she extended genuine pride in my decision to move away from my home in San Antonio—husband and children in tow—to attend the feminist powerhouse that is Smith. I felt like a small goat in her room—awkward and bleating, eating her food, drinking her coffee.

We were such different women, from such different backgrounds—while we had both been married young and had children, her sense of self, her ability to fight for her own life, was much more acute and honed than my own. But we were very much alike, too: both of us having defied the traditions of womanhood in order to seek a life balanced by whomever and whatever we loved.

When she ached, tired from the piles of signed "Fox," she stopped, massaged her hands, and asked, like a slap in the face: *Do you think you're a good mother?* Her tone was no longer pleasant, but serious as she placed the pencil down on the small desk, turning to look me in the eyes.

I was at once infuriated and broken into a thousand scattered pieces of who I had just been moments before. In the scattering of myself, I answered her: *I used to be.*

And I really believed that when I said it to her all those years ago.

I carried, maybe still carry, so much fear: fear of angry, violent men, fear of the reality of breakable mothers, fear of touch, fear of being stupid, fear of being made smaller, fear of not being male, fear of having no voice, fear of violence and tragedy, fear of birthing children into this world, fear of trusting people, fear of my children's bodies being colonized, fear of my children's minds being colonized, fear of having my children's spirits colonized, colonized by others as mine had been, fear of being valued or not valued according to my mothering, fear of not being enough, fear of not being able to fill the roles others had given me, fear of not having the guts to do the kind of work that needs to be done.

And all the guilt that comes along with it.

But there was no real knowing, at the time, that I wore all the fear (and guilt) that had accumulated in my bones since I was a very little girl, like a covering.

But I was learning, slowly, how to do things despite being afraid. I had very subconsciously (and subversively) pushed guilt aside, letting my fear of damn near everything become a series of hills and mountains and paths I would push through to get where I wanted to be—where I needed to be to be the mother I wanted for my children. I could not have known any of this then; I couldn't even have named my fears then—I was in the thick of it—but she knew. She knew everything.

I began to cry—shocked that someone who I'd just met could know me so deeply and honestly. My heart broke every day I left that rental house in Western Massachusetts, out into the snow and slush, my babies seven, four,

and one, seeking their warmth from their father. How I could feel their bones in my bones—cold and rattling and needing the heat of Texas to grow their roots strong. What had I done? How had I sacrificed my children's sense of security for my own damn education? And how could I ever make amends with babies who cried for their grandparents and good tacos—things I never lacked in my own childhood.

But I was not born privileged; I worked so hard to feel worthy of an education, worthy of the time it took me to write poems, and here it was in my hands. But my children, so small, wanted only one thing: their mother.

I had no idea that she had scripted, was scripting, a long, unbreakable tether between us. Ms. Adrienne Rich would, in the next six years, become my great teacher, mother-like, and I don't mean in the poetic, craft sense, necessarily, or even in a physical sense (she would leave this world for another before I would have a chance to see her again). But she would carve a space in my heart that could not be occupied by anything else; she would teach me to cultivate what grew there: truth. And from that truth, my work, my poems.

She wrapped her arms around me for a minute, handed me a box of tissues. But she wouldn't let me feel guilty.

I was nowhere near where she was. I was still in the first stage, and slow, and impatient with babies that came like tornadoes, sudden and loud. I didn't want them to be an excuse for stagnancy. I wouldn't let them be a weight.

*I would let him cry* she said of her middle child, *until the last word was written. If I opened the door, I would stop writing.* Her fists quivered as she held them to her chest, demonstrating the cringe of needing her own baby to leave the poet to her poems.

*She's going to cry, no matter what you do. Write your poems. They will be better for it.*

We kissed good-bye. She looked into me as if into a mirror long past, and assured my hands, holding them in her own, that the work they did was good. She sent me home with the basket of fruit for the babies and a determination like nothing else I'd ever felt.

And now she is gone—my once and future teacher. She has been gone from this world just over six months, and I mourn her in my spirit and in my chest.

It had become a dream, leaving that room all those years ago, to someday reunite with this woman who flipped mother-guilt on its head, maybe give her a book with *my* name on it. This will never happen now, but Ms. Adrienne Rich—because of this one day, this one question, “*Do you think you’re a good mother?*”—has become the woman to whom I turn when I am not quite ready or able to see my own truths. Her books are always near—in the car, on the nightstand, in the classroom. It has been six years since the first and only time I met her. Mothering has not changed. Poetry has not changed. How I love each a little more than the other.

So much she taught me that day.

Teaches me still.

*San Antonio, Texas, 2012*