For Ethel Rosenberg · Adrienne Rich

convicted, with her husband, of "conspiracy to commit espionage"; killed in the electric chair June 19, 1953

I

Europe 1953: throughout my random sleepwalk the words

scratched on walls, on pavements painted over railway arches *Liberez les Rosenberg!*

Escaping from home I found home everywhere: the Jewish question, Communism

marriage itself a question of loyalty or punishment

my Jewish father writing me letters of seventeen pages finely inscribed harangues

questions of loyalty and punishment One week before my wedding

that couple gets the chair the volts grapple her, don't kill her fast enough

Liberez les Rosenberg! I hadn't realized our family arguments were so important

my narrow understanding of crime of punishment no language for this torment



mystery of that marriage always both faces on every front page in the world

Something so shocking so unfathomable it must be pushed aside

II

She sank however into my soul A weight of sadness I hardly can register how deep her memory has sunk that wife and mother

like so many who seemed to get nothing out of any of it except her children

that daughter of a family like so many needing its female monster

she, actually wishing to be an artist wanting out of poverty possibly also really wanting

revolution

that woman strapped in the chair no fear and no regrets charged by posterity

not with selling secrets to the Communists but with wanting *to distinguish herself* being a bad daughter a bad mother

And I walking to my wedding by the same token a bad daughter a bad sister my forces focussed

on that hardly revolutionary effort Her life and death the possible ranges of disloyalty so painful so unfathomable they must be pushed aside ignored for years

III

Her mother testifies against her Her brother testifies against her After her death

she becomes a natural prey for pornographers her death itself a scene her body sizzling half-strapped whipped like a sail

She becomes the extremest victim described nonetheless as *rigid of will* what are her politics by then no one knows

Her figure sinks into my soul a drowned statue sealed in lead

For years it has lain there unabsorbed first as part of that dead couple on the front pages of the world the week

I gave myself in marriage then slowly severing drifting apart a separate death a life unto itself

no longer the Rosenbergs no longer the chosen scapegoat the family monster

till I hear how she sang a prostitute to sleep in the Women's House of Detention Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg would you have marched to take back the night collected signatures

for battered women who kill What would you have to tell us would you have burst the net

IV

Why do I even want to call her up to console my pain (she feels no pain at all) why do I wish to put such questions

to ease myself (she feels no pain at all she finally burned to death like so many) why all this exercise of hindsight?

since if I imagine her at all I have to imagine first the pain inflicted on her by women

her mother testifies against her her sister-in-law testifies against her and how she sees it

not the impersonal forces not the historical reasons why they might have hated her strength

If I have held her at arm's length till now if I have still believed it was my loyalty, my punishment at stake

if I dare imagine her surviving I must be fair to what she must have lived through I must allow her to be at last political in her ways not in mine her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine defining revolution as she defines it

or, bored to the marrow of her bones with "politics" bored with the vast boredom of long pain

small; tiny in fact; in her late sixties liking her room her private life living alone perhaps

no one you could interview maybe filling a notebook herself with secrets she has never sold