

# Undercover prying

Adrienne Rich, *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000–2004*  
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In her latest collection Adrienne Rich continues to mix the personal with the political, touching on subjects ranging from 9/11 to the Iraq war to the ongoing Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Rich is well known in the States for her engagé stance on progressive issues; her writings, both poetry and prose, frequently address sexism, homophobia, racism and social inequality in America. As a voice against oppression, whether at home or abroad (including that visited by her homeland abroad), she has spent much of her life in protest. Yet to categorise Rich as simply a political poet is to underestimate her considerable artistry – the music and mystery of her words – as well as the scope and variety of her project.

To Rich, now in her seventies, poetry may still be that “old subversive shape”, a site for investigating “*the history / of torture*” under Pinochet or the uprisings of “May ’68”, but it’s also a space for memorialising lost friends and expressing love for her partner. Even more striking, Rich engages in a surprising amount of metaphysical speculation throughout this volume, worrying the “skeins of consciousness” to fascinating ends. Pieces like “Equinox” and “Trace Elements”, with their use of empty spaces separating phrases, erratic line indentations, and fragmented repetitions, look, and sound, like mid-period Jorie Graham. The sense of urgent interrogation (“Can say I was mistaken?”), of thought enacted on the page in heightened utterance (“her only now seeing it [only now]”), that marked *The End of Beauty* is also to be found here, along with the exquisitely physical, felt images: “the spine’s vertical necklace swaying”, “the collarbone’s reverberant line”.

Rich subtly ponders the nature of perception in these lyrics, while also exploring the idea of memory, which “pursues its errands” more insistently the older we get. Memories are “small clear refractions / from an unclear season”, which act by salvaging bits of the author’s consciousness from the murky depths of her past. This is another form of diving into the wreck, only this time Rich seeks to retrieve not feminist history but her own former selves. The passing of years haunts poems such as “Alternating Current”, a sequence of elliptical scenes from the past (“Take one, take two / – camera out of focus”), which are, crucially, re-viewed from the present (“take three”). Rich’s awareness of ageing, of an ever changing self, is both poignant and poised: “We remain or not but not remain / as now we think we are”. But when death – “the faint clockface” – keeps looming nearer, how is the poet to “slow the

hemorrhaging” of existence? Though Rich cites the usual credo of the writer (I will live on through my words), she seems rather to accept mortality than defy it. “When our late grains glitter / salt swept into shadow / . . . will it matter?” Not, she suggests, as long as “there’s tenderness and solidarity” left in the world.

If tenderness and solidarity sound too hippie-ish, Rich’s more overtly political poems add depth to her world view. In the book’s third section, “Territory Shared”, she combines references to Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip with an extended meditation on language. (The section’s title comes from an epigraph by the Bakhtinian semiotician V. N. Volosinov, which runs in part: “Each and every word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other’ . . . A word is territory shared by both . . . the speaker and his interlocutor”.) In “Transparencies”, Rich moves from the guilt publicly expressed by some Israeli soldiers – “word that [they hope] would cancel deed” – to a series of metaphors likening language to glass.

Words are “windowpanes in a ransacked hut, smeared”, but also “clear as glass till the sun strikes it blinding”. A word “can be crushed like a goblet underfoot”, or “can translate into broken bones”. (The goblet line alludes to the ceremonial breaking of a wine glass by the bride and groom at traditional Jewish weddings.) Through such images Rich shows words to be obfuscatory, dangerous, deceptively double-edged – far from shared territory. Yet despite the failure of language to cancel deeds already done, there’s a possibility of redemption: “in a dark windowpane you have seen your face / . . . when you wipe your glasses the text grows clearer”. What counts, it seems, isn’t only what one says, but how one understands the words said by others. Even then, in Rich’s implacable logic, a shared understanding, a shared territory, isn’t enough to save us. It comes down to what we do, or don’t do – “how you live it”. If “word and body / are all we have to lay on the line”, then words can’t be separated from actions; both are needed to achieve justice.

Other pieces, though effective, offer more-predictable responses to recent events. “Don’t Take Me” is a satire on the right-wing climate of suspicion and violation of civil liberties in the States following 9/11; “The Eye” is an elegiac farewell to normal life during times of conflict, whether in America, Afghanistan, the Middle East or the former Yugoslavia. At times Rich lets her good intentions run away with a poem, as in the collection’s title sequence, another war-is-bad lament. But at her finest, what she calls her “undercover prying” still feels fresh – no small feat given the tendency of many established writers to grow stale. In this volume, by extending her enquiries into new terrain (philosophical, psychological), Rich has revitalised her work. That “music from a basement session overheard” sounds sweeter than ever.

JANE YEH