

# Seattle Journal for Social Justice

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Volume 1 | Issue 3

Article 50

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December 2002

## The School Among the Ruins

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### Recommended Citation

Rich, Adrienne (2002) "The School Among the Ruins," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 50.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol1/iss3/50>

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## The School Among the Ruins

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Adrienne Rich

Beirut.Baghdad.Sarajevo.Bethlehem.Kabul. Not of course  
here.

1.

Teaching the first lesson and the last  
—great falling light of summer will you last  
longer than schooltime?

When children flow  
in columns at the doors  
BOYS GIRLS and the busy teachers

open or close high windows  
with hooked poles drawing darkgreen shades

closets unlocked, locked  
questions unasked, asked, when

love of the fresh impeccable  
sharp-pencilled yes  
order without cruelty

a street on earth neither heaven nor hell  
busy with commerce and worship  
young teachers walking to school

fresh bread and early-open foodstalls

2.

When the offensive rocks the sky when nightglare  
misconstrues day and night when lived-in

rooms from the upper city  
tumble cratering lower streets

cornices of olden ornament human debris  
when fear vacuums out the streets

When the whole town flinches  
blood on the undersole thickening to glass

Whoever crosses hunched knees bent a contested zone  
knows why she does this suicidal thing

School's now in session day and night  
children sleep  
in the classrooms teachers rolled close

3.

How the good teacher loved  
his school the students  
the lunchroom with fresh sandwiches

lemonade and milk  
the classroom glass cages  
of moss and turtles  
teaching responsibility

A morning breaks without bread or fresh-poured milk  
parents or lesson-plans

diarrhea first question of the day  
children shivering it's September  
Second question: where is my mother?

4.

One: I don't know where your mother  
is Two: I don't know  
why they are trying to hurt us  
Three: or the latitude and longitude  
of their hatred Four: I don't know if we  
hate them as much I think there's more toilet paper  
in the supply closet I'm going to break it open

Today this is your lesson:  
write as clearly as you can  
your name home street and number  
down on this page  
No you can't go home yet  
but you aren't lost  
this is our school

I'm not sure what we'll eat  
we'll look for healthy roots and greens  
searching for water though the pipes are broken

5.

There's a young cat sticking  
her head through window bars  
she's hungry like us  
but can feed on mice  
her bronze erupting fur  
speaks of a life already wild

her golden eyes  
don't give quarter She'll teach us Let's call her  
Sister  
when we get milk we'll give her some

6.

I've told you, let's try to sleep in this funny camp  
All night pitiless pilotless things go shrieking  
above us to somewhere

Don't let your faces turn to stone  
Don't stop asking me why  
Let's pay attention to our cat she needs us

Maybe tomorrow the bakers can fix their ovens

7.

“We sang them to naps told stories made  
shadow-animals with our hands

washed human debris off boots and coats  
sat learning by heart the names  
some were too young to write  
some had forgotten how”