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# For Ethel Rosenberg

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# 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



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