

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 12

Issue 2 *Spring-Summer: Extended Outlooks: The Iowa Review Collection of Contemporary Writing by Women*

Article 100

1981

Mother-in-Law

Adrienne Rich

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rich, Adrienne. "Mother-in-Law." *The Iowa Review* 12.2 (1981): 291-292. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2769>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Mother-in-Law · Adrienne Rich

Tell me something

you say

Not: What are you working on now, is there anyone special,
how is the job
do you mind coming home to an empty house
what do you do on Sundays

Tell me something . . .

Some secret

we both know and have never spoken?
Some sentence that could flood with light
your life, mine?

*Tell me what daughters tell their mothers
everywhere in the world, and I and only I
even have to ask. . . .*

Tell me something.

Lately, I hear it: Tell me something true,
daughter-in-law, before we part,
tell me something true before I die

And time was when I tried.

*You married my son, and so
strange as you are, you're my daughter
Tell me. . . .*

I've been trying to tell you, mother-in-law
that I think I'm breaking in two
and half of me doesn't even want to love
I can polish this table to satin because I don't care
I am trying to tell you, I envy
the people in mental hospitals their freedom
and I can't live on placebos
or valium, like you

*A cut lemon scours the smell of fish away
You'll feel better when the children are in school
I would try to tell you, mother-in-law
but my anger takes fire from yours and in the oven
the meal bursts into flames*

*Daughter-in-law, before we part
tell me something true
I polished the table, mother-in-law
and scrubbed the knives with half a lemon
the way you showed me to do
I wish I could tell you—*

Tell me!

*They think I'm weak and hold
things back from me. I agreed to this years ago.
Daughter-in-law, strange as you are,
tell me something true*

*tell me something
Your son is dead
ten years, I am a lesbian,
my children are themselves.
Mother-in-law, before we part
shall we try again? Strange as I am,
strange as you are? What do mothers
ask their own daughters, everywhere in the world?
Is there a question?*

Ask me something.