

***CORRIDOR CONVERSATIONS,  
MARCH 27, 2022: POEMS***

**MURIEL RUKEYSER, *The Poem as Mask: Orpheus* (1968)**

When I wrote of the women in their dances and  
wildness, it was a mask,  
on their mountain, god-hunting, singing, in orgy,  
it was a mask; when I wrote of the god,  
fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love gone  
down with song,  
it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from  
myself.

There is no mountain, there is no god, there is memory  
of my torn life, myself split open in sleep, the rescued  
child  
beside me among the doctors, and a word  
of rescue from the great eyes.

No more masks! No more mythologies!

Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand,  
the fragments join in me with their own music.

**AUDRE LORDE, *A Litany for Survival* (1978)**

For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision  
crucial and alone  
for those of us who cannot indulge  
the passing dreams of choice  
who love in doorways coming and going  
in the hours between dawns  
looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures  
like bread in our children's mouths  
so their dreams will not reflect  
the death of ours;

For those of us  
who were imprinted with fear  
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads  
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk  
for by this weapon

this illusion of some safety to be found  
 the heavy-footed hoped to silence us  
 For all of us  
 this instant and this triumph  
 We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid  
 it might not remain  
 when the sun sets we are afraid  
 it might not rise in the morning  
 when our stomachs are full we are afraid  
 of indigestion  
 when our stomachs are empty we are afraid  
 we may never eat again  
 when we are loved we are afraid  
 love will vanish  
 when we are alone we are afraid  
 love will never return  
 and when we speak we are afraid  
 our words will not be heard  
 nor welcomed  
 but when we are silent  
 we are still afraid

So it is better to speak  
 remembering  
 we were never meant to survive.

**LUCILLE CLIFTON**  
*homage to my hips (1980)*

these hips are big hips  
 they need space to  
 move around in.  
 they don't fit into little  
 petty places. these hips  
 are free hips.  
 they don't like to be held back.  
 these hips have never been enslaved,  
 they go where they want to go  
 they do what they want to do.  
 these hips are mighty hips.  
 these hips are magic hips.  
 i have known them  
 to put a spell on a man and  
 spin him like a top!

## SHAPE-SHIFTER POEMS (#2) (1988)

who is there to protect her  
 from the hands of the father  
 not the windows which see and  
 say nothing not the moon  
 that awful eye not the woman  
 she will become with her  
 scarred tongue who who who the owl  
 laments into the evening who  
 will protect her this prettyslittlegirl

## MINNIE BRUCE PRATT, *Poem for My Sons* (1990)

When you were born, all the poets I knew  
 were men, dads eloquent on their sleeping  
 babes and the future: Coleridge at midnight,  
 Yeats' prayer that his daughter lack opinions,  
 his son be high and mighty, think and act.  
 You've read the new father's loud eloquence,  
 fiery sparks written in a silent house  
 breathing with the mother's exhausted sleep.

When you were born, my first, what I thought was  
 milk: my breasts were sore, engorged, but not enough  
 when you woke. With you, my youngest, I did not  
 think: my head unraised for three days, mind-dead  
 from waist-down with anesthetic labor, saddle  
 block, no walking either.

Your father was then  
 the poet I'd ceased to be when I got married.  
 It's taken me years to write this to you.

I had to make a future, willful, voluble,  
 lascivious, a thinker, a long walker,  
 unstruck transgressor, furious, shouting,  
 voluptuous, a lover, a smeller of blood,  
 milk, a woman mean as she can be some nights,  
 existence I could pray to, capable of  
 poetry.

Now here we are. You are men,  
 and I am not the woman who rocked you

in the sweet reek of penicillin, sour milk,  
 the girl who could not imagine herself  
 or a future more than a warm walled room,  
 had no words but the pap of the expected,  
 and so, those nights, could not wish for you.

But now I have spoken, my self, I can ask  
 for you: That you'll know evil when you smell it:  
 that you'll know good and do it, and see how both  
 run loose through your lives; that then you'll remember  
 you come from dirt and history; that you'll choose  
 memory, not anesthesia; that you'll have work  
 you love, hindering no one, a path crossing  
 at boundary markers where you question power,  
 that your loves will match you thought for thought  
 on the long heat of blood and fact of bone.

. . . . I can only pray:

That you'll never ask for the weather, earth,  
 angels, women, or other lives to obey you;

that you'll remember me, who crossed, recrossed  
 you,

as a woman making slowly toward  
 an unknown place where you could be with me,  
 like a woman on foot, in a long stepping out.

(from Pratt, *Crime against Nature*, 1990, 2013)

**ADRIENNE RICH, #29**

From *Tracking Poems: Contradictions* (1983-1985)

. . .

You for whom I write this  
 in the night hours when the wrecked cartilage  
 sifts round the mystical jointure of the bones  
 when the insect of detritus crawls  
 from shoulder to elbow to wristbone  
 remember: the body's pain and the pain on the streets  
 are not the same but you can learn  
 from the edges that blur O you who love clear edges  
 More than anything watch the edges that blur

In Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life* (W.W. Norton, 1986)

## AUDRE LORDE, *Who Said It Was Simple* (1973)

There are so many roots to the tree of anger  
that sometimes the branches shatter  
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks

the women rally before they march  
discussing the problematic girls  
they hire to make them free.

An almost white counterman passes  
a waiting brother to serve them first  
and the ladies neither notice nor reject  
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.

But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see causes in colour  
as well as sex  
and sit here wondering  
which me will survive all these liberations.

Audre Lorde, from *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1997)

## GLORIA ANZALDUA

### Excerpt from *To Live in the Borderlands* (1987)

TO LIVE IN THE BORDERLANDS MEANS YOU

are neither hispana india negra española  
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed  
caught in the crossfire between camps  
while carrying all five races on your back  
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

.....Cuando vives in la frontera  
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,  
you're a burra, buey, scapegoat,  
forerunner of a new race,  
half and half—both woman and man, neither—  
a new gender;

To live in the Borderlands means to  
put chile in the borscht,

eat whole wheat tortillas,  
 speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;  
 be stopped by la migra at the border checkpoints.....

**In the Borderlands**  
 you are the battleground  
 where enemies are kin to each other;  
 you are at home, a stranger,  
 the border disputes have been settled  
 the volley of shots have shattered the truce  
 you are wounded, lost in action  
 dead, fighting back;

To live in the Borderlands means  
 the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off  
 your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart  
 pound you pinch you roll you out smelling like white bread but dead;

To survive the Borderlands you must live  
 sin fronteras  
 be a crossroads.

from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987, 2012)

### **ADRIENNE RICH, *In Those Years* (1992)**

In those years, people will say, we lost track  
 of the meaning of we, of you  
 we found ourselves  
 reduced to I  
 and the whole thing became  
 silly, ironic, terrible:  
 we were trying to live a personal life  
 and yes, that was the only life  
 we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged  
 into our personal weather  
 They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove  
 along the shore, through the rags of fog  
 where we stood, saying I

### **IRENA KLEPFISZ**

#### **From East Jerusalem, 1987: *Bet Shalom* (House of Peace)**

In 1987 in East Jerusalem a group of Jewish women writers (American and Israeli) met with  
 Palestinian women to express feelings and responses to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and

Gaza. I was very moved by this meeting, but could not write about it until after the *intifada* had begun. I was particularly affected by one of the Palestinian women, to whom this poem is dedicated.

*To a Palestinian woman who I am afraid to name*

. . . . Whether we like it or not  
 We must sit here. What we feel  
 Does not matter. We are the heirs:  
 our legacy is in the air we breathe  
 the ground we stand on.

. . . . You say to us:

*You must understand  
 how it is for me.  
 You are writers.  
 Write about it.*

You mean: Our voices carry.  
 Yours alone does not.

All of us part. You move off in a separate  
 direction. The rest of us return  
 to the other Jerusalem. It is night.  
 I still hear your voice. It is in the air  
 now with everything else except sharper  
 Clearer. I think of your relatives  
 your uncles and aunts. I see the familiar  
 battered suitcases cartons with strings  
 stuffed pillowcases  
 children sitting on people's shoulders  
 children running to keep up

Always there is migration  
 on this restless planet everywhere  
 there is displacement somewhere  
 someone is always telling someone else  
 To move on to go elsewhere.

Night. Jerusalem. *Yerushalayim*.  
 Jerusalem. If I forget thee  
 Oh Jerusalem Jerusalem Hebron  
 Ramallah Nablus Qattana if I  
 forget thee oh Jerusalem  
 Oh Hebron may I forget  
 my own past my pain  
 the depth of my sorrows.

Klepfisz, *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue* (Eighth Mountain Press, 1990)

## **JUNE JORDAN**

### **Conclusion from *Poem about my Rights* (1980)**

. . . I am the history of rape  
 I am the history of the rejection of who I am  
 I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of  
     myself  
 I am the history of battery assault and limitless  
 armies against whatever I want to do with my mind  
 and my body and my soul and  
 whether it's about walking out at night  
 or whether it's about the love that I feel or  
 whether it's about the sanctity of my vagina or  
 the sanctity of my national boundaries  
 or the sanctity of my leaders or the sanctity  
 of each and every desire  
 that I know from my personal and idiosyncratic  
 and indisputably single and singular heart  
 I have been raped  
 be-  
 cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age  
 the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the  
 wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic  
 the wrong sartorial I  
 I have been the meaning of rape  
 I have been the problem everyone seeks to  
 eliminate by forced  
 penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/  
 but let this be unmistakable this poem  
 is not consent I do not consent  
 to my mother to my father to the teachers to  
 the F.B.I. to South Africa to Bedford-Stuy  
 to Park Avenue to American Airlines to the hardon  
 idlers on the corners to the sneaky creeps in  
 cars  
 I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name  
 My name is my own my own my own  
 and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this  
 but I can tell you that from now on my resistance  
 my simple and daily and nightly self-determination  
 may very well cost you your life

from *The Collected Poems of June Jordan* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2005)

## A FEW RESOURCES: My Favorites

### ANTHOLOGIES AND COLLECTED POEMS

Howe, Florence. *No More Masks! An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets*. Revised edition. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Lorde, Audre. *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.

Rich, Adrienne. *Collected Poems, 1950-2012*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2016.

### COLLECTED ESSAYS

Lorde, Audre. *Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007.

Rich, Adrienne. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*. New York: W.W Norton, 1986.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Essential Essays: Culture, Politics, and the Art of Poetry*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2018.

### ON-LINE

The Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>

Very good short critical biographies of almost all the poets we looked at, additional poems to read, and podcasts of contemporary readings

The Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives, San Francisco State University, <https://poetry.sfsu.edu/about-poetry-center>

The archives have 5000 hours of recorded tapes from 40 years of readings.

Other archives include the Penn Sound Archive and Harvard University's Woodberry Reading Room Listening Booth. And check out the websites of individual poets: e.g. [adriennerich.net](http://adriennerich.net)