

1981

# Integrity

Adrienne Rich

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## Integrity · *Adrienne Rich*

*the quality or state of being complete;  
unbroken condition; entirety*

— Webster

A wild patience has taken me this far  
as if I had to bring to shore  
a boat with a spasmodic outboard motor  
old sweaters, nets, spray-mottled books  
tossed in the prow  
some kind of sun burning my shoulder blades.  
Splashing the oarlocks. Burning through.  
Your forearms can get scalded, licked with pain  
in a sun blotted like unspoken anger  
behind a casual mist.

The length of daylight  
this far north, in this  
forty-ninth year of my life  
is critical.

The light is critical: of me, of this  
long-dreamed, involuntary landing  
on the arm of an inland sea.  
The glitter of the shoal  
depleting into shadow  
I recognize: the stand of pines  
violet-black really, green in the old postcard  
but really I have nothing but myself  
to go by; nothing  
stands in the realm of pure necessity  
except what my hands can hold.

*Nothing but myself? . . . My selves.*

After so long, this answer.

As if I had always known

I steer the boat in, simply.

The motor dying on the pebbles

cicadas taking up the hum

dropped in the silence.

Anger and tenderness: my selves.

And now I can believe they breathe in me

as angels, not polarities.

Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius

to spin and weave in the same action

from her own body, anywhere—

even from a broken web.

The cabin in the stand of pines

is still for sale. I know this. Know the print

of the last foot, the hand that slammed and locked that door,

then stopped to wreath the rain-smashed clematis

back on the trellis

for no one's sake except its own.

I know the chart nailed to the wallboards

the icy kettle squatting on the burner.

The hands that hammered in those nails

emptied that kettle one last time

are these two hands

and they have caught the baby leaping

from between trembling legs

and they have worked the vacuum aspirator

and stroked the sweated temples

and steered the boat here through this hot

mist-blotted sunlight, critical light

imperceptibly scalding

the skin these hands will also salve.